

THE KURDISH COMMUNITY IN LEBANON

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This paper provides a general background of the Kurdish community in Lebanon, including their history, geography, ethno-linguistic diversity, citizenship and socioeconomic status, and associational organization. The paper also discusses the reasons why Kurds are not well integrated into the Lebanese political system and what impact this had on their status in the country and on their Kurdish identity.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

Kurdish presence in Lebanon goes as far back as World War I years; however, their major influx took place in the two decades between Sheikh Sai'd's revolt in 1925 and World War II.¹ This was followed by another major wave in the period between the mid-1940s and early 1960s. While a significant number of the second wave moved to Lebanon from Syria escaping the poor economic conditions and the cultural and political repression that began there in 1958, virtually all Lebanese Kurds originated from the villages of Mardin and its surrounding areas. Oral accounts of the success of Kurds who had already moved to Lebanon, as well as the country's proximity to Kurdistan, were important incentives that encouraged the second group to move (Ahmad, 1995, p. 83).

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¹Earlier presence of the Kurds in Lebanon dates back to the arrival of the Ayyubids in the 12th century, as well as to those families that were sent to Lebanon by the Ottomans to maintain order in various parts of the empire. These Kurdish families settled in and ruled many areas of Lebanon for long periods of time. Examples of these families include: the Ayyubis, the Sayfa emirs (princes) in Tripoli, the Mir'bi family in 'Akkar, the Junblats and the 'Imads in Mount Lebanon, and the Hamiyeh family in Baalbeck. Detached from their homeland for many generations, these Kurdish families became fully integrated into Lebanon's social and political structure and have centuries ago been completely assimilated. For more details, see Ahmad (1995, pp. 39-61).

Although Kurds in Lebanon are designated as one coherent group in the perception of the mainstream Lebanese population, a closer look at the community uncovers a great deal of internal ethno-linguistic divisions. In contrast to its religious homogeneity (all being Sunni Muslims), the Kurdish community in Lebanon is divided into two main groups: those who speak the Kurmanji (or Bahdinani) dialect and those who speak an Arabic dialect imbued with Kurdish, Syriac, and Turkish influences. Kurmanji speakers understand this Arabic dialect (which many members of the community call “Mhallami” or “Mardalli”) more easily than vice versa.

The Kurmanji speakers, often referred to as “Kurmanj,” account for approximately one-third of the community. Most of them originated from the villages of Fafeh, Jibl-Graw, Kinderib, Marjeh, Marska, and Matina and speak Kurdish as first language and Arabic as second. Many of them, however, have forgotten the language, primarily because there is no school in Lebanon that teaches Kurdish, a fact that makes it very difficult for the community to preserve the language after generations of residence in the country.

The Arabic-dialect-speaking Kurds are referred to in a variety of different ways. For these Kurds, the process of defining oneself is often a laborious and vague process that entails a lot of confusion and shifting from one label to another. When they are invited to talk about their ethnicity, members of this group refer to themselves as “Arab Kurds” or “Mardallis” and, in some cases, as “Arabs” or as “Kurds.” The context and identity of people they interact with determines how they identify themselves (Kawtharani, 2003, p. 65). The majority, however, refer to themselves after the clusters of

villages from where they came, such as “al-Rashdiye” and “Mhallamiye.”² For the purposes of this paper, the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds are labeled as Kurmanj and the non-Kurmanji-speaking group as Mardallis.³ Among the largest families of the Mardalli group in Lebanon are: ‘Atriss, Fakhro, Fattah, Harb, Miri, Omari, Omayrat, Ramadan, Rammu, Sha‘bu, Sharif, Shaykhmusa, Siyala, and al-Zein.

The Kurds have always been one of the sizeable minority groups in Lebanon. An accurate figure of their number, however, is not available because there has been no census conducted in Lebanon since 1932 and because the identity cards that Kurds hold do not specify their ethnic background. Most sources though have estimated their number prior to 1985 to be between 60,000 and 90,000, with more than two-thirds of them living in the capital Beirut (Ahmad, 1995, pp. 84-86). Given that thousands of Kurdish families fled the country during the second half of the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war, it is believed that their number is still in that range today. Most of the Kurds who fled the country in the 1980s currently live in Western Europe but continue to visit Lebanon on a regular basis, while investing in the real estate and sending remittances to family members who remained in Lebanon.

Kurds who moved to Lebanon between the 1920s and 1960s arrived with very little education and very few skills other than in agriculture. Most of them settled in low-income areas in Beirut, including: ‘Ayn al-Mreisseh, al-Basta, Bourj al-Barajneh, the down-town sector, Furn al-Shubbak, Raml al-Zarif, and Zukak al-Bilat, as well as al-

²The Mhallamis are originally a group of Arab families most of whom centuries ago moved from northern Iraq to the Kurdish area located between Mardin, Midyat, and Diyarbekir. Over the years, they adopted a considerable number of traits of Kurdish origins. Mhallamis who moved to Lebanon all came from Mardin region, more specifically from an area called Mhallamiye, a cluster of about 15 villages.

³The word “Mardalli” is used after the region of Mardin. It is used by many non-Kurmanji speakers to refer to their language and ethnic identity.

Karantina/al-Maslakh area. Their agricultural skills served them very little in their new urban setting. As unskilled laborers, they first entered the labor market as porters and box manufacturers in the vegetable market of downtown Beirut. A few decades later, some developed new occupational skills in such areas as house painting, construction, auto mechanics, tailoring, and carpeting, others became merchants of vegetables, and still others were able to establish gradually-expanding business enterprises. The majority, however, were stuck in a self-reproducing cycle of poverty and illiteracy. Due to financial difficulties, many of their women needed to work as janitors and housekeepers in order to survive. After more than five decades of residence in Lebanon, most Kurds in Lebanon still have meager socioeconomic means and are considered among the least literate communities in the country.

THE CITIZENSHIP DILEMMA

According to Ahmad (1995, pp. 89-95) and Meho (1995), the adverse socioeconomic and political conditions of the Kurds in Lebanon are not exclusively a result of the poor economic and educational background of the members of the community, but also a result of the lack of majority of them the Lebanese citizenship—at least until the mid-1990s. Their poverty, lack of property and occupational skills, high illiteracy rate, feelings of insecurity and alienation, and ill-treatment by various Lebanese groups were found to be significantly related to the Kurds' status as noncitizens.

The naturalization process of the Kurds (and that of several other communities who resided in Lebanon for decades) was not an easy one. Since the establishment of Greater Lebanon by France in 1920, the numerical balance of the different confessional

and ethnic communities in the country has been a critical matter. At that time, Christians were slightly outnumbering Muslims, however, that predominance increased with the influx of thousands of Armenian refugees who escaped Turkish genocide during World War I. Most of these refugees were allowed to acquire Lebanese citizenship. Following the naturalization of Armenians, Christian hegemony in the country was formalized in the 1932 census, which showed that Christians outnumbered Muslims by a ratio of 6:5. Since then, no census was taken and citizenship to new immigrants, such as the Kurds, became very restricted until the mid-1990s.

Most Kurds failed to recognize the value of citizenship until it was nearly impossible for them to acquire it. They failed to apply for the citizenship for several reasons. First, many thought of Lebanon as a temporary place of living and sooner or later they would go back to an independent Kurdistan after raising enough money (Ahmad, 1995, p. 94). Second, many Kurds were afraid of military conscription, a fear they carried from Turkey where the terms of the compulsory military service were very harsh and long (Kawtharani, 2003, p. 67). Third, before World War II, travel across borders to neighboring countries did not require the carrying of a Lebanese citizenship; noncitizens were able to travel from and back to Lebanon by means of certificates issued by the French authorities (Ahmad, 1995, pp. 138-139). According to a Kurdish local, more Kurds would have applied for citizenship had it been a requirement for travel, especially since many Kurds regularly traveled to Syria and Turkey (Meho, 2002, p. 63). Perhaps the most important reason why Kurds did not apply for Lebanese citizenship was because of their unfamiliarity with civil rights and the legal significance of citizenship. In

the peripheral regions of Turkey from where Lebanese Kurds came, state institutions, apart from the military, were practically nonexistent (Kawtharani, 2003, p. 67).

Kurds realized the value of citizenship upon the introduction of war-time rationing in 1941. During World War II, the majority of Kurds were denied food ration cards because they did not have Lebanese citizenship (Ahmad, 1995, p. 139). In response, many Kurds rushed to apply for citizenship, but found it was too late to do so. Prior to 1940, citizenship was granted to all applicants who had lived continuously in Lebanon for at least five years, or who had married a Lebanese citizen and lived in the country for at least one year after marriage. Legislation passed in 1940, however, made Lebanese naturalization theoretically impossible.

In the early 1960s, Kurds who did not have citizenship sought the help of Kemal Junblat, a prominent socialist leader who was serving as the Minister of Interior.⁴ He granted them what was known as “unspecified citizenship” which enabled the children of the holders of this identification card to obtain citizenship, provided they were born in Lebanon. Due to Christian opposition, however, the granting of non-specified citizenship was soon abandoned and was replaced in 1962 with “under-study” identification cards (qaid al-dars), which were transmitted hereditarily and enabled their holders to leave and reenter Lebanese territories and gave them the right to enroll in public schools, but denied them citizenship rights (Ahmad, 1995, pp. 141-142). Thus, the holder of the “under-study” IDs could neither vote nor seek public employment.⁵ Despite the fact that the

⁴Many Kurds argue that Junblat helped the community because of his Kurdish roots.

⁵The “under-study” identification cards were usually granted to applicants for periods of three years, after which they could be regularly renewed. Applications, fingerprints, and application fees were required from each individual to obtain the ID card. Kurds residing outside Lebanon had grave problems when Lebanese embassy officials refused to renew their cards.

issue of the naturalization of noncitizens was raised in the Lebanese Parliament by more than a dozen of cabinets between the 1970s and early 1990s, all efforts to resolve the problem failed because of objections from Maronite representatives.

For instance, in November 1974, Prime Minister Rashid al-Sulh insisted that the inaugural government statement include an article committed to resolving the issue of naturalizing Lebanese noncitizens. Following an intense debate with the Christian Phalangist Party (al-Kata'ib) and the National Liberals' Party (Hizb al-Wataniyyin al-Ahrar), George Saadeh, the Phalange representative in the government, drew attention to the political ramifications of naturalizing the Kurds by stating: "We, the Phalangists, have worked hard in the past to give the Armenians Lebanese nationality and this was accomplished. But what was the result? They have become the electoral balance in the districts they live in. So if the Prime Minister wants his electoral fate to be determined by the Kurds, we are with him."⁶

It was not until the rise of the government of Rafik al-Hariri to power that the citizenship problem was resolved. His government issued a naturalization decree on June 21, 1994 to settle the legal status of all qualified non-naturalized individuals living on Lebanese territories. The decree allowed the majority of the non-naturalized Kurds to acquire citizenship. To their dismay, somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 Kurds missed out because they were unable to afford the cost of the application, were abroad and could not travel to Lebanon to file, or simply because they did not believe that the granting of citizenship would materialize. The decree raised a storm of political opposition from Maronite officials who argued that many of the citizenship recipients did not meet the

These Kurds were forced to travel to Beirut with their families, incurring severe financial expenses, in order to complete the transactions.

⁶Cited in Rohilat, no. 9 (November 1974), p. 2.

minimum qualifications required for naturalization. The main argument of the opposition was that the naturalization has disrupted the confessional balance of the country. For Kurds, however, the decree represented the salvation that they had long been waiting for (Kawtharani, 2003, p. 69). Estimates of the number of naturalized Kurds ranged between 10,000 and 18,000 (Abu Chakra, 1995, p. 150; Meho, 2002, p. 65).

SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Just as it could on the eve of the civil war in 1975, Lebanese society today can be easily divided into five broad definable social classes: the national elite, the upper class, the middle class, the upper lower class, and the lower class. In general, the Kurds have always belonged to the lower class, which for the most part includes working people who possess neither office nor wealth, and little or no education. These working people include taxi drivers, vegetable peddlers, barbers, sharecroppers, unskilled day laborers, servants, office boys, and craftsmen or tradesmen who work as employees or apprentices. Many are employed in other menial jobs in construction, road building, and small industry, most often with no social or medical insurance or trade-union rights (Hanf, 1993, p. 199). Low-paid lower class people often work on a temporary basis and are easily dismissed from their jobs. They also do not have adequate property or savings to use as insurance when work becomes slack. Additionally, many members of the lower class—especially those who were historically denied citizenship—are perceived as aliens and are severely vulnerable to discriminatory and unjust treatment. Kurds, in particular, still face greater adversity than most other members of the lower class, largely because they are not Arabs. This ethnic differentiation denies many of them employment,

humanitarian support, and equal treatment in government offices, even after they became citizens.

As in most other developing countries, education in Lebanon both reinforces the position of many traditionally high status groups and provides other groups with an important channel for upward mobility (Starr, 1977, p. 212). However, the fact that lower class people are relatively overwhelmed by the pressure to provide their families with basic resources for survival means that they have neither the money nor the time to send their working-age children to schools. As a result, the lower class becomes the least literate class in Lebanon and the easiest for others to exploit and manipulate. In 1995, Meho found that 85% of the Kurds live at or below the poverty line. He also found that the Kurds' educational attainment is extremely deficient; almost 60% of them are virtually illiterate and the figure goes up to over 95% among the elderly. Kurds also overwhelmingly lack property; most of them rent their places of living.

According to Khuri (1969, p. 38), mobility from the lower to higher class requires not only education and wealth but also social and psychological mobility; that is, the family must transform itself from an extended family sub-culture—a characteristic of lower class communities—to a new model of family ties and duties that are often represented in the nuclear family. The family must also transform itself from social and economic dependence to social and economic independence. Such a transformation process is still in its infancy among the Kurds.

This bleak picture of the socioeconomic conditions of the Kurds started to change following both the end of the civil war in 1990 and the attainment of citizenship in the mid-1990s. However, the extent and speed of this change remains to be seen. One

noticeable change that took place in the last decade has been the rise of Kurds' participation in local politics and associational organizations. As a result, they started to attract considerable interest from various Lebanese politicians, particularly from Prime Minister Hariri and the two influential Sunni Islamist groups: The Association for Charity Projects (Jam'iyat al Mashari' al-Khayriyya), better known as al-Ahbash, and the Islamic Group (al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya). The following section provides a brief account of the most important Lebanese Kurdish organizations.

ASSOCIATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Despite the frequent attempts of Prince Kamuran Bedirkhan to motivate the Kurdish community to focus on education and get involved in social and political activities, Kurds in Lebanon remained virtually uninvolved until the 1960s. Things however started to change after the events that took place in the region in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The union between Syria and Egypt in 1958-1961 had significant repercussions on the social, economic, and political conditions of the Kurds in Syria, and the end result was ultimately felt in Lebanon. The union, which ushered in a period of intense Arab nationalism, initiated the first oppressive measures against the Kurds in Syria (McDowall, 1998, pp. 15-19). In due course, several thousands of Syrian Kurds—mostly politicized students, workers, refugees, and asylum seekers—moved to Lebanon. Despite the temporary presence of most of these Kurds, they were instrumental in raising awareness among Lebanese Kurds regarding the significance of social and political activism.

Another, and perhaps a more important, factor leading to social and political awareness among the Lebanese Kurds was the 1958 fall of the Iraqi monarchy, which ultimately led to the outbreak of the 1961-1975 Kurdish war. Mulla Mustafa Barzani found a needed publicity platform for the war in the liberal city of Beirut, where thousands of Kurds lived. As the Kurdish war boosted the national self-awareness of Lebanese Kurds, many of them began to sense their impoverished status and to think about methods of enhancing their living conditions. One such method was the establishment of socio-political organizations.

Among the first attempts was the establishing of The Kurdish Democratic Party in Lebanon (Al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdi fi Lubnan – al-Parti), better known as The Parti. Founded in 1970 by Jamil Mihhu, a house painter, The Parti started to operate clandestinely in July 1960 under the name of the Organization of Kurdish Democratic Youth in Lebanon (Munazzamat al-Shabiba al-Dimuqratiyya al-Kurdiyya). It was formed by a cluster of young Lebanese Kurds with the assistance and encouragement of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS), and was considered the Lebanese affiliate branch of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq (KDP). Initially, the activities of the Organization were limited to communication with local Kurds and dissemination of statements explaining methods of improving the social, cultural, and political conditions of the Kurdish community, with particular emphasis on education and naturalization. As of 1961, and upon the recommendation of KDPS, activities developed to include assisting Kurdish representatives sent by Mulla Mustafa Barzani to publicize the Kurdish national movement in Iraq.

The group's political activities remained underground until Barzani informed Mihhu of the significance of organizing Kurdish political activities into a legal body which would serve both the Lebanese Kurds and the Kurdish national movement. Given the popularity of Barzani among Lebanese Kurds and his support of Mihhu, the latter succeeded in mobilizing many Kurds to rally behind him. He asked the Lebanese government to legalize the party's status and was given the license on September 24, 1970. Soon after its founding, Mihhu was lured by the Iraqi government for financial gains, and his popularity among Lebanese Kurds eventually deteriorated. Consequently, The Parti was dismantled into several factions and subdivisions that recreated in Lebanon the inner divisions of the Kurdish leadership in Iraq and Syria, until all of them were disbanded during the 1980s and early 1990s. In addition to the discussion of the Rezgari party below, for a more detailed account of the Kurdish political parties in Lebanon, see Ahmad (1995, pp. 146-183).

Currently, the most active and influential Lebanese Kurdish associations are: The Rawdah Delegation, The Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association (Al-Jam'iyya al-Kurdiyya al-Lubnaniyya al-Khairiyya), The Cedars Sports and Cultural Club (Jam'iyat al-Arz al-Riyadiyya al-Thaqafiyya), The Rezgari (Freedom) Party, The Omayrat Family League, The Lebanese Social Association (al-Jam'iyya al-Lubnaniyya al-Ijtima'iyya), The Kurdish Cultural and Humanitarian League in Lebanon (al-Rabita al-Thaqafiyya al-Insaniyya al-Kurdiyya al-Lubnaniyya), and The Future Generation (Jil al-Mustaqbal), all officially recognized by the Lebanese government. The following is a brief account on each.⁷

⁷This section is largely adopted from Kawtharani (2003, pp. 69-96), who conducted face-to-face interviews with presidents, board members, and regular members of the associations.

The Rawdah Delegation

This Mhallami-based association was established in 1960 by members of the Omari family, who migrated to Lebanon in the 1940s. Starting in the 1950s, they gradually moved from the traditionally Kurdish-populated areas of Beirut, such as Zukak al-Bilat and ‘Ayn al-Mreisseh, to the poorer slum areas around the Palestinian refugee camp of Bourj al-Barajneh in the southern suburbs of Beirut. The Omaris are the only Kurds who live in the suburbs of Beirut surrounded by non-Sunni non-Beirutis neighbors. This association sponsors several institutions that are vital for the basic needs of the community for which it caters. It has a mosque and an infirmary that serves the needs of approximately 300 patients per month, and is run by six medical doctors covering the most basic medical specializations. The association also owns a secondary school, al-Iman (Faith), which enrolls over 500 students. According to its president, the Delegation has over 6,000 informal affiliated members, most of them from the Omari family.

Since the early days of its establishment, the Rawdah Delegation had very close ties with the Islamic Group, a powerful Islamic group that has strong relations with the country’s Islamic Sunni Council (Dar al-Fatwa), the highest Sunni religious authority in Lebanon. Through their favorable connections with the Council, the Islamic Group and the Rawdah Delegation have been able to raise significant amounts of money to fund their medical and educational institutions.

The members of the Delegation, like many other non-Kurmanji speakers, exhibit ambiguity in relation to the definition of their ethnic identity. They maintain the general myth that they are descendants of the Arab tribe of Banu Hilal that centuries ago settled in Eastern Turkey. Although they preserved their Arabic language, they admit that they

had gained considerable Kurdish traits from their surroundings. When they arrived in Lebanon, they were labeled as “Kurds” and the label remained part of their identity. Like most other non-Kurmanji groups, the Omari clan does not want to dissociate itself from the rest of the Kurdish community. If they refute Kurdish ethnicity, they will run the risk of being excluded from the Kurdish community, yet without guarantees of being fully accepted by the mainstream Sunni community. The fact that the Rawdah Delegation constantly participates in the Lebanese parliamentary elections compels them to preserve its solidarity with other Kurdish associations and clans in order to acquire their support during election times, however challenging this proves to be.

The Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association (LKPA)

The LKPA was the first legal Kurmanji association to be established in Lebanon. It was founded on September 19, 1963, when Kemal Junblat was the Minister of Interior. Today, its main goals are to distribute material aids whenever they are available and to provide as many services to the Kurdish community as possible. Occasionally, it offers to members of the community night and weekend Kurdish language courses. The LKPA is currently considered one of the largest and most active Lebanese Kurdish associations. According to its president, the association has over 200 families officially registered which make the number of affiliated adult family members approximately 1,000. Almost every year since the mid-1990s, the LKPA has organized Newroz concerts, each attended by over 1,000 people.

The majority of the LKPA members are Kurmanji speakers. Over the past few years, however, there has been a lot of effort to attract and recruit non-Kurmanji speakers to foster the relationship between the two groups. In the most recent board elections, two

out of the five elected candidates were from the non-Kurmanji group. Today, most members of LKPA hold the Lebanese citizenship. As most other Kurdish associations, the LKPA survives on membership fees and meager donations and external funds.

The Cedars Sports and Cultural Club (CSCC) and the Rezgari Party

The CSCC and the Rezgari are treated in the same section because of their common origins. The Club was founded on March 18, 1969 to enhance Kurdish athletic and cultural activities. It was essentially instituted as the platform of the Rashdiye group of Kurds. The headquarters of the Club, an apartment in a lower middle-class building in Beirut, is fully decorated with portraits of the founding members who are all from the Fakhro clan and their kin families, including: ‘Ali, ‘Atriss, Hasan, al-Kurdi, and Rammu, among others. One of the distinguishing activities of the Club was the establishment of a soccer team that won several nationwide championships in the early 1970s. Another distinguishing activity was the publication of a bulletin named “Rasti” (The Straight Path) that dealt with the general conditions of the Kurds in Lebanon and the affairs of Kurdistan. The bulletin is still being published but irregularly and now focuses primarily on the general news of Lebanese Kurds and particularly those of the Club’s closely associated families. Currently, most of the athletic and cultural activities of the club have either been relinquished as a result of lack of resources or have been significantly reduced in scope. According to its president, the number of members in the club has fluctuated over the years between two and 300.

The Rezgari Party was founded on April 3, 1975 by Faysal Fakhro as a political wing of the Cedars Club. Fakhro claimed that the Rezgari is needed because of the failure of The Parti to appeal to non-Kurmanji speakers and because of Mihhu’s support for the

Iraqi regime's one-sided plan for Kurdish autonomy. Fakhro also claimed that The Parti was transformed into a Mihhu family organization rather than one that represents the interests of the whole Kurdish community. Once a very popular party, membership in the Rezgari has dropped significantly over the years due to internal divisions, lack of financial resources, and the emigration of most of its members to Europe. It relinquished the publication of its popular monthly magazine, Xebat (The Struggle), in 1995 as a result of financial difficulties.

Despite the fact that the presidents and all members of both the Rezgari party and Cedars Club descend from the non-Kurmanji-speaking Mardalli group, a thorough embrace of Kurdish identity is spelled out in their bulletins and publications. The constant reference to Kurdish history, language, and literature in Rasti and Xebat attest to their interest in preserving their Kurdishness and in representing all Lebanese Kurds. Although some, especially members of CSCC, acknowledge the linguistic differences between them (i.e., the Mardalli) and the Kurmanji group, they stress the unity of the larger community. Their argument is that despite the existence of linguistic differences, they are unified by their Kurdishness. Such an embrace of Kurdishness carries with it many benefits for both the Club and the Rezgari party. It enables the president of the Club to establish himself as a leader and a spokesman of the Kurds vis-à-vis the community and vis-à-vis the state. It also helps the Club establish better relations with the Barzani leadership, which could lead to material support in case they are given in the future.

The Omayrat Family League and the Lebanese Social Association

The dominance of the Fakhro lineage and their kin families in the Cedars Club and the Rezgari party alienated several other large Mardalli clans, particularly the Omayrat, whose members decided to establish their own association or join others. They founded the Omayrat Family League in 1979 to serve the interests of the members of the clan and their kin families. Many other members of the clan joined the Islamist group, the Lebanese Social Association (LSA). Nothing in the name of the LSA denotes its Kurdishness or its Islamist vocation. Yet, it is well known as the official platform of the Islamist Kurds affiliated with al-Ahbash. While the majority of LSA's members are from the Omayrat family, other smaller Mardalli families are well represented, such as the Madani, Simmo, Sa'do, and others. LSA has 300 official members but claims the support of many more individuals and families. It was founded in the 1980s by a group of Beirut, Arab families. Its original founders, however, gradually abandoned it leaving it entirely in the hands of the Kurds in 1998. LSA receives considerable legal and material support from al-Ahbash.

Al-Ahbash group are well known to have always enjoyed good relations with the officials in power, which allows them to act as an intermediary between the Lebanese state and the various social groups. By virtue of their privileged contacts, al-Ahbash group were able to help their Kurdish affiliates in their dealings with the government before and after they received Lebanese citizenship. They protected them from the infringements of power and arbitrary prosecutions often undergone by weak minority groups. Al-Ahbash also provided their Kurdish followers with unrestricted access to their educational and medical institutions, services that historically were not easily accessed by

Lebanese Kurds. Al-Ahbash, in return, gains new recruits who in time of elections cast their votes to al-Ahbash candidates.

The LSA, despite its open affiliation with al-Ahbash, claims to be open to all Kurdish groups and is at the service of the general community. Their attempts to approach other Kurdish associations, however, have been viewed suspiciously because the association is not being perceived other than an affiliate of al-Ahbash. In the discourse of the association, inter-group ethnic distinction among the various Kurdish groups is clearly stated. To the larger Lebanese society members of the LSA identify themselves as “Kurds.” But when compared to Kurmanji Kurds, they prefer to identify themselves as “Mardallis” or “Mardalli Kurds.” They justify this discrepancy in that they do not desire to create tension and conflict that will only undermine the general well-being of the community.

As members of the Omayrat clan, the same rationale of LSA is used by members of the Omayrat Family League in the expression of their ethnic identity. However, one important characteristic distinguishes them from each other. The members of the League limit their support of al-Ahbash to the religious aspect of the relationship and deny the Islamist group their political allegiance. Instead, the League members stress their loyalty to Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri. They justify this in that as a group they prefer to have an official marja‘iya (or someone in power) to speak up for them.⁸ An official marja‘iya

⁸“The marja‘iya in Lebanon is a concept that denotes, in addition to an official political framework within which public legality or legitimacy is ensured vis-à-vis the authorities, an access to not-necessarily monetary benefits but protection from the law and the security authorities, as well as access to otherwise inaccessible resources. A marja‘iya could be a political party, a za‘im, or any public figure that has solid relations with the political and security forces of the country” (Kawtharani, 2003, pp. 78-79).

can extend legitimacy and protection on Kurds more so than someone who is not in power.

The Kurdish Cultural and Humanitarian League in Lebanon (KCHLL)

Among Lebanese Kurds, KCHLL is considered as the unofficial representative of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Lebanon. Apart from members of the administrative board who all hold Lebanese ID cards, most members of this group are Syrian and Turkish Kurds who reside temporarily in Lebanon or visit the country periodically. The main activities of the League include providing courses in Kurdish language, organizing exhibitions of Kurdish artifacts that raise revenues, and organizing folkloric events on national occasions, such as Newroz. According to Kawtharani (2003, pp. 72-73), the number of people who attended KCHLL's 2002 Newroz party amounted to approximately 5,000 individuals, including celebrants from Syria. The association also issues a magazine in Arabic called Sorghul (Red Rose), focusing on the cultural events of Kurds in Lebanon and Syria. In spite of the display of numerous political referents that underly a strong identification with the Kurdish national cause, and a fervent involvement in Kurdish affairs in Turkey with an assertive nationalist spirit, members of the board stress the supremacy of their loyalty to Lebanon.

The Future Generation

Three important features characterize this association: All members are from the Mardalli group, particularly from the Mhallamiye area, are staunch allies of Prime Minister Hariri, and refuse to be identified as Kurds. Founded in 1997, the goal of the association is to provide aids to its members and followers. The association's loyalty to

Hariri is symbolized by the use of the word “Future” that features in its name. The motto has been used in the campaigns of Hariri for several years and has become his trademark. Leaders and members of this association completely dissociate themselves from Kurmanji-speaking and non-Kurmanji-speaking groups and prefer to call themselves Arabs. They insist they have absolutely no involvement or sympathy with the Kurdish cause and that full assimilation in Lebanon is their ultimate goal. This association is discussed here because they are still considered Kurds in the perception of the mainstream Lebanese population.

In summary, it is evident that most of the existing Lebanese Kurdish associations act as extended kinship networks that are based on ethnic and tribal backgrounds which address in particular the well-being of the members of the kinship or village group rather than the community as a whole. This explains why there have been and still are more Kurdish associations and organizations than might be expected, considering the size of the community and its human and financial resources. The common goal that animates all of the associations is, first, to acquire needed resources to help their group members and, second, to perpetuate solidarity among their affiliates and create provision for social and cultural activities.

As for the Kurdish political parties, in particular, Kurds took little part in their activities. For the majority of Kurdish men, participation seemed irrelevant to their primary concerns, which centered on finding jobs and securing food and medical aid for their families. Their lack of interest was also related to the fact that most of the political parties did not emerge out of Lebanese Kurdish political consciousness; instead, they were instigated by outside actors or were haphazardly established as a reaction to

dissatisfaction with existing parties. Moreover, the predominantly “self-appointed” leaders not only dominated the power apparatuses of the parties, but also exploited its resources for personal goals. These leaders lacked both the education and skills necessary to run organizations effectively and efficiently and, at a time when most of the them were incapable of supporting their parties financially, they still promised to build schools and health care centers—plans that were completely beyond their means. At various times, national issues (i.e., events in Kurdistan) prevailed over local ones and interfered with the primary activities of the parties, often leading to the neglect of efforts to improve the general status of the community in Lebanon. Perhaps most importantly, the various Kurdish groups rarely coordinated their efforts or cooperated with each other. The impact of this on the political status of the Kurds in Lebanon is discussed below. Not unreasonably, many Kurds also feared that if they are very active in politics, they will be threatened or detained by Syrian intelligence that has had strong presence in Lebanon since the outbreak of the civil war in 1975.

KURDS IN THE LEBANESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Throughout its modern history, Lebanon has been characterized by the division of its population into competing families and religious groups politically organized in what is known as patron-client relationship.⁹ Such a relationship, involving an interchange of unequal goods and services between patrons (za‘ims or leaders) and clients (followers), has profound effects on the social and political culture of the Lebanese. In exchange for

⁹Lebanon is a country of minorities. It is a mosaic of many ethnic and religious groups, the most prominent being the Shi‘i and Sunni Muslims and the Druzes, the Christian Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, and Armenians. Other smaller groups include Kurds, Alawites, Syrians, Assyrians, Protestants, and Chaldeans.

their support of a za'im, usually in the form of votes or more active forms of political participation, the followers expect to receive assistance or favors in securing employment, government benefits, and mediation with government officials or other prominent persons (Starr, 1977, p. 208).

According to Johnson (1986, p. 94), Lebanon's population of clients through the civil war period can be divided into three main categories that comprise the za'ims' resources of patronage: First, and most important, are the rich clients who usually belong to large families and have adequate financial resources to support the za'im. Second, are the financially and politically less important voters, who make up the majority of the za'im support base. Such people generally have simple requests which could be dealt with by the assistants of the za'im. The third category of clients is comprised of two groups of people: those who vote in another constituency and the disenfranchised Kurds and Palestinian refugees who are largely noncitizens. Members of this third category have little to offer the za'im and, as a result, are largely excluded from clientelist networks. As more Kurds became citizens as of the mid-1990s, more attention was given to them by local za'ims, even though they are not promoted yet from the third to the second category of clients.

By virtue of their residence in Beirut, Kurds came to identify themselves with the politics of the city. As an ethnic immigrant group that did not have adequate educational and economic resources to participate fully in social and political activities, and with the lack of outside support from fellow Kurds, the Kurds of Lebanon looked to Sunni za'ims in Beirut to provide them with the missing leadership and protection. Kurds have always been keen to be enlisted by whoever Sunni leader was in power. In the 1940s and 1950s,

they were strong supporters of members of al-Sulh family, more specifically Prime Ministers Riad and Sami who were responsible for naturalizing hundreds of Kurdish families. In the 1960s and early 1970s, many Kurds shifted their loyalty to Saeb Salam, another Sunni leader belonging to a wealthy notable family. Unlike Riad and Sami al-Sulh, however, Salam was not as popular among Kurds because his favors for them (e.g., schooling and access to health care) were not provided on a collective basis. Rather, they were specifically channeled to those Kurds who held Lebanese citizenship; that is, to those who could return the favors with electoral votes. In the 1960s and 1970s, Kurds also became supporters of Rashid al-Sulh and the Druze leader, Kamal Junblat, who provided the noncitizens with the under-study identification cards (Kawtharani, 2003, pp. 98-101).

During the 1975-1990 civil war, Kurdish allegiance spread out among different factions. Although Kurds had little reason to take sides in the war, the situation changed when the Christian Maronite Phalange forces purged them and the Palestinians from East Beirut. Consequently, many Kurds decided to take up arms against the Christian-dominated Lebanese Front (al-Jabha al-Lubnaniyya). They did so by joining the Lebanese Communist Party, the Movement of Independent Nasserites (Harakat al-Nasiriyyin al-Mustaqllin better known as al-Murabitun), and other Sunni militia groups. Several joined Palestinian organizations, especially the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). The Kurds sought common cause with these parties not only because they were assaulted by Christian militias, but also because they thought that, upon victory, the parties they

joined would deliver them from permanent political, economic, and social misfortunes imposed on them by the existing political system (Meho, 2002, p. 70).

In the early years of the war, Kurdish participation focused primarily on fighting Christian militias in East Beirut. Then in 1984, they started to fight Amal, the main Shi'i militia group. At the time, Amal was trying to control south and west Beirut on behalf of Syria. Although its main focus was the suppression of Palestinian guerrilla factions, Amal also fought al-Murabitun and other Sunni militias and rapidly eliminated them to gain full control of the city. Unhappy about Shi'i encroachments into vital areas of the Sunni-dominant west Beirut, the Kurds joined forces with the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (al-Hizb al-Taqaddumi al-Ishtiraki) to resist Amal's supremacy (Hanf, 1993, p. 304; Sayigh, 1986, p. 16). Fighting lasted until 1987 when Syria and the warring factions reached an agreement to withdraw all militias from Beirut and hand over public order and security to Syrian forces. As part of the agreement, the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) retreated to its heartland in the Shouf mountains; however, the Shi'i forces remained in Beirut because they were still needed to maintain control over the areas surrounding Palestinian camps. This left the Kurds vulnerable to Shi'i dominance and to Syrian surveillance and harassment. Many Kurds—primarily those who were members of PSP and other anti-Syrian Palestinian organizations—were jailed and thousands others either fled to Europe or moved to the Biqa' region and the Druze mountains. The exodus of these Kurds had also to do with the deteriorating economic conditions in Lebanon as well as the feeling of the need to find a more secure place of living (as opposed to continue living in Lebanon as noncitizens) (Meho, 2002).

Kurdish involvement in the war not only cost them lives and resulted in their displacement, it also exposed the extent of the prejudice they faced in Lebanon. For instance, during the civil war, the Kurds were asked to volunteer their services as auxiliaries to the Sunni al-Murabitun militia. The Kurds willingly gave these services yet lost out when it came to sharing relief supplies from Europe: "Supplies were usually divided into four parts and handed over to the Maronites, the Druze, the Shi'is, and the Sunnis." As Christians, Armenians received a share from Maronites. Although Kurds should have received a share from their fellow Sunnis, they did not because they were not viewed as insiders or as members of the Sunni community.¹⁰

The end of the civil war in 1990 and the naturalization of Kurds a few years later presented the Kurds with new opportunities to establish, and benefit from, fresh patron-client relations. Being the most powerful Sunni leader in the country, Prime Minister Hariri was their main target as a patron. Kurds sought Hariri not only because of his power and wealth, but also because of his role in the promulgation of the naturalization decree in 1994. He was considered by the majority of Kurds as their new champion. Naturally, in the aftermath of their naturalization, Kurds started to express a set of demands to Hariri, including: representation in the parliament and the municipality of Beirut, recruitment in the civil service administration and military bureaucracy, and financial support to establish health, cultural, and educational centers (Kawtharani, 2003).

Although more than half of the 15,000 Beirut's Kurdish voters have willingly voted for the Prime Minister and his associates in the 1996 and 2000 parliamentary elections, Kurds gained very little in return. Even members of Jil al-Mustaqbal association, who claim total allegiance to Hariri, expressed their dissatisfaction at the

¹⁰Interview with a Lebanese Kurdish refugee in Sweden, cited in Vanly (1992, p. 167).

level of benefits received from him and his institutions. Overall, even after most Kurds became citizens, they are still excluded from virtually all the spoils that other religious and ethnic groups and family and communal associations receive (e.g., employment in the public sector, official representation, and government subsidies and aids). In describing the relationship between the Kurds and the office of the Prime Minister, most Kurds claim that it is a policy of exploitation and manipulation (Kawtharani, 2003, pp. 142-143).

Despite the disproportionate support of and from Hariri in comparison to the electoral votes he gets from Kurds, the latter rarely criticize him for that and remain loyal to his leadership. This policy is evidenced by Kurds' constant casting of their votes in the parliamentary elections of 1992, 1996, 2000 and municipal elections of 1998, the frequent visits they pay to his assistants and political aides, and the continued requests they make. According to Kawtharani (2003, pp. 146-147), this continuous Kurdish loyalty to a patronage that does not provide concrete and fair benefits is justified by: (1) the hope that the benefits may be gained in the future and (2) the fact that there is presently no other alternative source of patronage than Hariri's.

The aides of Hariri justify their minimal support by arguing that the Kurds are subdivided into several antagonistic groups that hamper the crystallization of a coherent and representative leadership that can speak in the name of all Kurds. For example, before the 1996 elections, Hariri asked all seven Kurdish associations to convene with him to discuss issues of interests. In return for their votes, Hariri promised to assign a Kurd the position of "councilor in charge of Kurdish affairs" within his institutions whose task would be to look after the interests and needs of the community. He asked the

associations to select one representative for all of them. Unable to agree over the selection of a representative, the whole idea was dropped. In conclusion, only when Kurds are united, officials will give them greater attention. Hariri's aides realize that Kurds have very few other options and the meager benefits they provide are enough to maintain the support of the Kurds (Kawtharani, 2003, p. 146).

In summary, the allegiances of the Kurds have almost always been driven by their need to secure patronage. Despite some individual small-scaled and basic gains that Kurds have been able to extract from some za'ims, they have in general been excluded from the main flow of resources. The problem is that Kurds are very much divided and, therefore, do not exert any real threat to traditional Sunni patronage, which is aimed at serving the "local" (i.e., Arab) Sunni population. Because of this, no real, efficient clientelistic networks are available for Kurds.

The nature of patronage that Hariri offered the Kurds is considerably below the expectations of the community. Few medical and financial benefits were granted to members of the community and these are considered very meager in comparison to what fellow Sunnis and Armenians receive. In the future, Kurdish success and integration will be contingent on the internal cohesion and accord among the members of the community and their socioeconomic development. It will also be contingent on their ability to become a more powerful pressure group that politicians cannot but account for.

LEBANESE KURDS AND KURDISH NATIONAL POLITICS

Although Lebanon was a center of Kurdish politics and politicians since the 1920s, Kurds of Lebanon became involved in Kurdish national politics only with the

outbreak of the Kurdish war in Iraq in 1961.¹¹ Since then, Kurds, especially Kurmanjis, have proclaimed their support of Mulla Mustafa Barzani and his successor, Mas'ud.¹² Their involvement included disseminating news (through bulletins, reports, and so on) about the war to members of the community, accommodating and assisting Kurdish delegates sent by Barzani, helping out Kurdish political refugees from Syria, and sending material aid to refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan. Following the collapse of the Kurdish revolt in 1975, there were even calls in Lebanon to recruit fighters and send them to Iraqi Kurdistan to continue the war.

Lebanese Kurds' involvement in Kurdish national politics also included forming their own political parties, some of which were extensions of Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP), such as The Parti and The Parti/Central Leadership (Al-Parti/al-Qiyada al-Markaziya). Others participated in political parties that were formed by Syrian Kurds living in Lebanon, such as Rezgari II and The Leftist Kurdish Democratic Parti Organization in Lebanon (Munazzamat al-Parti al-Kurdi al-Yasari fi Lubnan). Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Kurdish contacts with representatives of Barzani's KDP virtually ceased and all Kurdish political parties, with the exception of Rezgari, were dismantled.

As of the mid-1980s, many Kurds started to sympathize with, and even join, the PKK, which seemed to respond to ambitions and concerns of the Kurdish people,

¹¹To illustrate, the Kurdish National League, Khoybun, was formed in Bhamdoun, Lebanon in October 1927. Among several other figures, Kamuran Ali Bedirkhan stayed in Lebanon for several years and from 1943 to 1946 he published in Beirut the weekly *Roja Nu* in Kurdish and French. He moved to Paris in 1948 where he taught Kurdish at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations and published a bulletin on Kurdish studies. He died in Paris in 1978.

¹²Despite their participation in and celebration of Kurdish national festivals, such as Newroz, non-Kurmanji Kurds rarely speak of, or relate to, Kurdish national politics.

particularly in overcoming the tribal divisions and factionalism that characterized other Kurdish political movements. The PKK promoted a vision of a united Kurdish nation fighting for independence and Kurds who supported them found in this movement and in Ocalan the embodiment of a national dream and a renewed claim of an identity forged out of national dignity and pride in nationalist belonging (Kawtharani, 2003, pp. 102-105). The popularity of the PKK, however, diminished rapidly with the capture of Ocalan in 1999 and his subsequent apology to the Turkish government for his war. The popularity of PKK was receding even before 1999 though. Very few Lebanese Kurds took pleasure in the violent means (sometimes against Kurds themselves) used by Ocalan to achieve autonomy in comparison to the more successful Mas'ud Barzani who was able to reconstruct Iraqi Kurdistan relatively by more peaceful means and establish himself as the most prominent representative of Kurds in Iraq.

Symbolic loyalty for Barzani remained perpetuated sentimentally throughout the 1980s and 1990s and ultimately led to the renewal of direct interaction between Lebanese Kurdish associations and KDP. Several meetings took place between the two in the past five years or so, most of which focused on Lebanese Kurds voicing their urgent needs for services, such as a community school, a cemetery, and health center. When Lebanese Kurds speak about Barzani, the general discourse is that this leadership has responsibilities towards them, to help them improve socially, economically, and politically (Kawtharani, 2003, p. 106). Despite their continuous efforts to secure benefits from Barzani's administration, the latter has not committed itself yet to the provision of any material help to the community in the post-civil war era. Promises have been made to

assist but it remains for the future to verify the credibility of these promises (Kawtharani, 2003, p. 107).

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since their arrival to Lebanon in the early 1920s, Kurds have been held in low esteem by most Lebanese communities and have often been objects of social discrimination. This situation forced most Kurds to maintain their ethnic boundaries and to fall short of integration into the Lebanese political system, the effect of which is acutely exemplified in barring them access to a share in the Lebanese quota system and denying them representation in parliament and state institutions. In addition to waiting for over 70 years before the majority of them became naturalized citizens, Kurds suffered at the hand of almost every major sectarian group in the country. The Christian Maronites denied them citizenship to avoid tilting the sectarian balance of the country towards Muslims. The Sunnis did not fully embrace their coreligionist Kurds and continue until today to reject them as equal. Both the Druzes and the Sunnis used the Kurds to fight their wars, ignoring and disregarding them when no longer needed. Despite all this, after living for several decades in Lebanon, the majority of Kurds seem to have acquired a dual life style and have not given up their efforts to identify themselves as both Kurds and Lebanese.

Kurdish misfortunes have also been a result of their own lack of effort and vision. In comparison to other countries where Kurds live, Lebanon has been more than a safe haven for them. Kurds were allowed to create their own political parties and social organizations, establish their own schools and health care centers, use their own language

and openly celebrate their cultural events, and participate in the political process of the country. In general, Kurds missed a lot of opportunities that were presented to them in Lebanon. It took many of them two decades before they realize the significance of applying for Lebanese citizenship. That was at a time when acquiring it became theoretically impossible. Originating from extremely poor and isolated villages of Mardin, it was not until the mid-1960s that Kurds started to appreciate the value of education. Even then, many parents did not send their children to school and very few allowed their daughters to attend school beyond the early teenage years.

Today, there are more Kurds who hold degrees higher than a bachelor, but the majority of Kurdish youths still do not study beyond high school. In addition, while the number of Kurds acquiring and learning new, more respected professional skills is rising, there are still many Kurdish men who inherit their fathers' menial, low-income occupations. As a result, Kurds still need to fully embrace the two important channels for upward mobility (i.e., higher education and better occupations) that could help reinforce their position in the Lebanese society and would allow them to produce leaders or cadres who would more influentially appeal to the majority of Kurds and Lebanese politicians.

While the goal of all Kurdish associations was and still is to improve the general conditions of members of the community, virtually none of the associations function with any form of an agenda or plan. They all conduct their activities haphazardly and with minimal or no cooperation among each other. Their lack of resources and unity has allowed, and continues to allow, others to manipulate them and deny them the bargaining power they need to get their fair share of state resources. The lack of vision and poor

leadership skills among the heads of these associations have rendered the latter ineffective in changing Lebanese politicians' view of the Kurds.

The future of the Kurds in Lebanon is not as bleak today as it was before the naturalization of the majority of them in the mid-1990s. However, the improvement in the general conditions of the Kurds and their integration into the Lebanese society will be contingent on the internal cohesion and harmony among the members of the community, their attainment of and focus on education, as well as on the ability of the associations to attract the young and educated generations of Kurds who will eventually lead these associations. All these are prerequisites for creating a stronger community that would be able to exert enough pressure to attract better services and more recognition from Lebanese politicians, particularly the Sunnis.

Given the current lack of resources necessary to do the aforementioned, Kurds will need help from Lebanese leaders such as Prime Minister Hariri, as well as from leaders in Kurdistan, particularly from Barzani's administration because of its historical relationship with Lebanese Kurds and because of its national, regional, and international status. With growing opposition and competition to Hariri's leadership in Beirut and the increasing number and concentration of Kurdish population in Sunni Beirut, Hariri (perhaps more so his associates) will need to maintain and depend on Kurds' allegiance and even strengthen it. Kurds can earn, and Hariri will most likely have to provide, more benefits from their mutual alliance. What Kurds need to do is to know how to exploit this dependence and alliance and use them towards improving their social, economic, and political conditions.

Help from leaders in Kurdistan will not only contribute to improving the general conditions of the Lebanese Kurds, but also help them preserve their ethnic identity while integrating into the Lebanese society. Kurds will need help especially in bolstering the activities and image of their associations among the masses. This can be done by providing these associations with material and logistical support that would enable them to develop projects that would make people highly dependent on them (e.g., by founding basic medical centers, owning a cemetery, and providing academic scholarships). Today, many Kurds, especially the younger generations, have forgotten their language and know little about their culture, civilization, and history. Therefore, projects in the areas of teaching of Kurdish language and history and in the areas of celebrating cultural events are also highly recommended. Leaders from Kurdistan should encourage Lebanese Kurdish associations to collaborate. The unity of the Kurds in Lebanon is a key factor for them to become a very influential community.

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