



# World Directory of Minorities

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## Kurds

### Profile

There are around one-and-a-half million Kurds in Syria. They speak Kurdish (the Kirimanji dialect), but most speak Arabic, too, and many Kurds have at least partially assimilated into Arab society. Most are Sunni Muslims. About a third of them live in the foothills of the Taurus Mountains north of Aleppo, and an equal number along the Turkish border in the Jazirah. A further 10 per cent can be found in the vicinity of Jarabulus north-east of Aleppo, and from 10-15 per cent in the Hayy al-Akrad (Quarter of the Kurds) on the outskirts of Damascus.

### Historical context

The Kurdish community of Kurd Dagh and some in Jarabulus has been in existence for centuries, and is more assimilated into Arab culture. The larger community of Kurds in Jazira was largely composed of those who fled the Turkish Republic during the repression there in the 1920s. It is among these Kurds that national awareness and tension with the Arab majority has been most acute.

The French policy of encouraging minority separatism fostered intercommunal tensions, for example with the Assyrian and Armenian communities in the Khabur valley. Kurds were recruited into *Les Troupes Speciales* and encouraged to found Khoybun, a Kurdish nationalist party of the 1920s and 1930s, which made Arab nationalists uneasy.

The first three coups following Syrian independence were carried out by officers of part-Kurdish background, each relying on officers of similar background. Following the overthrow of the last of them, Kurds were purged from senior army ranks. During the heyday of Arab nationalism from 1958 to 1976, Kurds came under increasing repression, partly because of their close identity with the Syrian Communist Party. Many Kurds were arrested, imprisoned and tortured. In 1961 a census in Jazira discounted 120,000 Kurds as foreigners. In the following year the government announced a major population transfer, intended to settle Arabs all along the Turkish border. Although never fully implemented, 60,000 Kurds left the area for Damascus. Repression lessened, but continued under Hafez al-Assad. In March 1986 police fired on thousands of Kurds in traditional dress gathered in Damascus to celebrate a spring festival, killing one.

Syria supported the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Iraq at the time, and in 1990 politically active and nationalist Kurds were elected to the Syrian Parliament. Yet domestic repression of Kurds continued. Government pressure on Kurdish land rights, exacerbated by drought in the second half of the 1990s, accelerated Kurdish urbanization. In 2003, after US-led forces toppled Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Iraqi Kurds rapidly consolidated their power in northern Iraq, Syrian relations with Turkey improved markedly - borne of a common fear of a Kurdish state that could make territorial claims on the two countries.

The situation for Syrian Kurds took a decided turn for the worse in 2004. Clashes between Arab and Kurdish fans after a football match in March led to Syrian security forces in Qamishli opening fire on crowds for two days running. Kurdish anti-government riots spread to other cities, and security forces killed 38 people and detained over 1,000 more. In April 2004, a 26-year-old Kurd was reportedly tortured to death in prison in Afreen. Although the government released most of the Kurds detained in March over the following months, in June it banned political activities by Kurdish parties.

In May 2005, Sheikh Mohammed Mashouq al-Khaznawi, a cleric who had been outspoken regarding discrimination

against Kurds, disappeared. Authorities told his family the following month that his body had been found. He had been tortured. Following his funeral, some 10,000 Kurds took to the streets in Qamishli but were beaten, and Kurdish shops were raided.

## **Current issues**

Of the 1.5 million Kurds in Syria, some 300,000 are considered stateless due to a 1960s government scheme which reclassified them and their descendants as non-citizens. As stateless persons they are unable to obtain official documents - birth certificates, identity cards or passports - hence they cannot travel abroad, work for the government or benefit fully from health and educational facilities. Despite a May 2004 statement by the president that the government is committed to deal with the Kurdish citizenship issue, little progress has been made. More generally, the use of Kurdish language and expression is restricted.

Police violently prevented an October 2006 rally in Damascus in support of these stateless Kurds. Amnesty International raised alarm over the November 2006 arrest of the son of Sheikh Mohammed Mashouq al-Khaznawi, who had been tortured and murdered in May 2005. His son had been demanding an investigation.

Instability in Iraq indirectly led to more violence between Syrian Kurds and state authorities in 2007. As Turkish anger over cross-border Kurdish rebel incursions from northern Iraq increased over the course of the year and Turkey massed troops at the frontier, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited Turkey to express his support. With the crisis mounting, in early November around 200 Syrian Kurds took to the streets in the north-eastern town of Qamishli, near the Turkish and Iraqi borders, to express their support for Iraqi Kurds. Government security forces broke up the rally with bullets and teargas, killing one young Kurd and injuring four others. Thousands of Kurds attended the funeral of the Kurdish youth the following day.

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