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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Conciliatory, yet Oppressive: the Kurdish Issue in Syria through the Eyes of Ba'thists from Party Foundation to the 8 March Revolution

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**ABSTRACT:**

*This paper aims to shed light on the ideological premises and political activities of the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party toward the Kurds before its rise to power in Syria. To start with, the study will retrace the evolution of the Kurdish political movements and their initial interactions with Arab nationalists. Then, it will provide a detailed analysis of the Ba'thist theoretical framework, indicating that, in the early phase of its history, the party did not completely perceive the Kurdish issue as an existential threat to its goals. In addition, the research assumes that 'Aflaq's "conciliatory" vision began to weaken with the establishment of the United Arab Republic, which caused a radical reshuffling between Arab and Kurd relations. In particular, two dynamics will be investigated: the first one is related to the shift in ideological approach toward the minority issue in Ba'thist literature during the 1950s; the second one focuses on the change in perspective caused by the United Arab Republic and 8 March Revolution.*

**KEYWORDS:** (at least five keywords separated by comma)

*Ba'th, Kurds, Nationalism, Pan-Arabism, Syria*

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## 1. Introduction: Syrian Kurds and Arabs under the French Mandate

Within the broader field of Syrian Kurdish studies, which has over the years generated a substantial and consistent body of academic literature, one theme appears not to have been fully explored: the relationship

between Arab and Kurdish nationalists. This topic is essential for understanding both the evolution of Syrian politics and the "minority issues" from an Arab perspective, particularly from the standpoint of the Ba'th party, which had ruled the country from 1963 to 2024. With regard to this, Western scholarship has primarily focused on the presidency of Hafez and Bashar Assad from a security and socio-economic perspective (Ababsa 2004, 2009; Ababsa, Roussel and Dbiyat, 2007; Hinnebusch 1989; Hinnebusch, El Hindi, Khaddam and Ababsa 2011), while overlooking ideological considerations, with the partial exception of Tejel (2009, 53–59). In this regard, this research aims to fill this gap, exploring the complex and multi-faceted relationship that developed between Ba'thists and Kurdish nationalists from the proclamation of the Syrian republic in 1946 to the 1963 coup d'état, which marked the transformation of the Ba'th into an authoritarian state-party regime. In particular, this research assumes two main points: first, that the Syrian Ba'th perspective on the Kurdish issue has evolved over time; and second, that Syrian Kurdish political movements have expressed varying and sometimes conflicting views in managing their relations with the central government and Arab nationalism. To support these arguments, the study has relied heavily on primary sources from Arab and Kurdish members, together with intellectuals associated with both Syrian and Iraqi political organizations. This includes figures such as Michel 'Aflaq, the founder of the Ba'th Party, as well as the leaders of Kurdish nationalist groups like those led by Nur al-Din Zaza and 'Abd al-Hamid Darwish. Whenever relevant, Arab newspapers and journals have been consulted to provide a broader context. Finally, reference to the extant literature and French (and partially British) archives has enhanced the historical framework and helped mitigate any potential bias from Syrian authors.

Early evidence of interaction between the two groups dates back to the First World War, when the Ottoman Empire entered the conflict alongside the Central Powers. The Arab nationalist elites (*qawmiyyūn*)[1] of Mesopotamia and the Levant, who aspired to detach themselves from the rule of the Sublime Porte, seized the opportunity by forming an alliance with France and the United Kingdom. Following the correspondence between the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Henry McMahon, and the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein al-Hashimi, the nationalists started a revolt – called "the Great Arab Revolution" (*al-Thawra al-ʿArabiyya al-Kubrā*) – aiming to create an independent Arab state with the consent of the United Kingdom.

Initially, a number of Kurds joined the insurgency. Many families living in the urban centers were integrated into society and some of them enjoyed a high social and economic status within the Levantine *vilayets*. This is exemplified by the al-Yusufs and the Shamdins, who gained prominence by controlling grain and livestock trades (McDowall 2007, 467). Tensions between Arabs and Kurds began to consistently emerge after the end of hostilities. Following the Versailles Peace Conference, Faysal, son of Hussein and leader of the Arab nationalist front, established the short-lived Arab Kingdom of Syria (*al-Mamlaka al-ʿArabiyya al-Sūriyya*) in response to the Anglo-French partition plan of the Near East outlined in the Sykes-Picot agreement. By contrast, the Kurdish community of Damascus, despite being incorporated into the rest of the city and fully Arabized (Khoury 2003, 20–21), sided with the Allies (White 2010, 902). A remarkable exception is represented by the notable 'Ali Agha Zalfo, who took part in the Great Arab Revolt fighting against the French and even participating in the attempt to assassinate the High Commissioner of the Levant, General Henri Gouraud (Salih 2022, 77–78). In the case of rural communities in the East, their attitude towards the Europeans was more nuanced, ranging from co-optation to open confrontation and refusal of Mandatory rule (Tejel

[1] In this article, Arabic terms in italics are romanized according to the JMES transliteration style. See the following link: https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-file-manager/file/57d83390f6ea5a022234b400/TransChart.pdf. Arabic names and expressions put in regular font style are not transliterated, except for simplified hamza (') and 'ayn (') romanization.

Gorgas 2014, 843). However, the tribes of the Jazira[2] did not join the Hashemite ranks, concentrating instead on defending their territory. For this reason, coordination with Damascus turned out to be loose and sporadic, if compared to the level of interaction between Iraqi Kurds and Arabs, who formed a solid front to resist the British advance in Mesopotamia, as evidenced by the 1919 revolt of Hamadia (Tauber 1995, 268–270). During the initial phase of the Mandate period, the Kurds, despite being the largest non-Arab group of the country, were not granted a special administration as accorded to the religious minorities, such as Druzes, Christians and Alawites. Two main reasons could explain this decision: the first is related to the prolonged resistance of the tribes against the *Armée du Levant*[3] after the dissolution of the Hashemite Kingdom; the second was a mere lack of interest from Paris in recognizing an ethnic group that inhabited the most underdeveloped region of the so-called *Syrie Utile* ("Useful Syria")[4]. The relationship between occupier and occupied began to shift in the latter half of the 1920s. This change was prompted by the establishment of the Turkish republic and the aftermath of the unsuccessful revolution led by Shaykh Said in Anatolia, which resulted in a significant exodus of Kurds and other minorities who sought refuge in the Jazira. This process significantly altered the ethno-religious composition of the Syrian region, introducing a remarkable number of Circassians and Chechens, both persecuted by Tsarist Russia, as well as Assyrians and Armenians, who suffered genocide under the Ottomans. All these groups sought refuge in Syria asking for French protection (Galletti 2010, 199–200). This mass departure prompted the Mandate administration to reconsider its policies. Following the colonial strategy based on "divide and rule" and the *mission civilisatrice* concept, France aimed to develop the Jazira[5] and mediate among the newcomers, with a particular emphasis on supporting and expanding the Christian community.[6] The resettlement of persecuted minorities also solidified French Mandatory control over peripheral lands such as the Jazira and helped define the international borders with Turkey (White 2017, 152–153). Thanks to the arrival of the Anatolians, the Kurds began to nurture their connections with urban elites and the Mandate's spokespersons, laying the groundwork of a rudimentary political network (Tejel Gorgas 2014, 845–846). This was crucial in establishing on 5 October 1927, with the permission of French authorities, the first Syrian-Kurdish political group named Khoybun, which means "be yourself" (al-Kati' 2020, 287; Kajjo and Sinclair 2011). Another success occurred on 23 June 1928 when, during the convention of the Constituent

[2] The *Jazīra* (meaning "the island") is a historical region of the Middle East corresponding to the northern part of Mesopotamia, delimited by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

[3] The "Army of the Levant" (*Armée du Levant*) was established by General Henri Gouraud in 1919 through the reorganization of the previous *Détachement Français de Palestine et de Syrie* which had fought alongside British troops during the First World War. As the Ottomans surrendered, Gouraud increased the size of the *Armée* in order to take control of the territory before it could fall into the hands of the British and Turkish Kemalists. In 1920, the *Armée* easily defeated Faysal's battalions at the Battle of Maysalun and crushed the insurrection that had erupted in Northern Syria led by the Kurdish rebel Ibrahim Hananu, which lasted until late summer 1921 (Méouchy 2014, 80–104). Once the "pacification" process was completed, the *Armée du Levant* became the backbone of the public security system of the Mandate (Khoury 2003, 79).

[4] The concept of "Useful Syria" was first introduced by French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau as a geopolitical concept (Laurens 2003, 16–17). In this way, he sought to differentiate the Levantine region: "Useful Syria" (*Syrie Utile*) encompassed the fertile coastal region populated by Christian communities and the oil-rich area of the Jazira; "Useless Syria" (*Syria Inutile*) comprised the territories of present-day Palestine and Jordan, which were deemed unpalatable to Paris's interests.

[5] It was in this context that the town of al-Qamishli was founded in 1928.

[6] "We know that the pacified and colonized Jazira has grown considerably under the Mandate. Between 1920 and 1940 we settled a number of Christians who currently amount roughly to one third of the entire population, while the rest is divided among Kurds, Arabs, and Bedouins". From "Enseignement en Djézireh", telegram sent on 27 February 1953 by the French General Consul in Aleppo, Henri De Bourdeille, to the French Ambassador of Syria, Jacques-Emile Paris. Document no. 86AL, *carton* X, dossier 1–6 Syrie, QONT-527, Centre des Archives diplomatiques du ministère des Affaires étrangères (CADMAE), Paris.

General Assembly for the proclamation of the Syrian Republic, a document was issued that called for the emancipation of the Kurds with the aim of integrating them as active members of the "Syrian people family" (Rondot 1939, 105). However, the signing of the Franco-Syrian Treaty in 1936, which anticipated the independence of the country, and the collapse of the Mandatory system during the Second World War marked the end of the special relationship between France and the Kurds and led to the gradual dissolution of the Khoybun (Tejel 2009, 29 and 34–37).

## 2. The Kurdish Question as Viewed by the Ba'thists in the Aftermath of Independence

In the early years of independence, the former Khoybun activists continued to expand their connections, aiming to promote cultural activities in the urban areas populated by Arabs and, more importantly, to establish contact with the central government in order to obtain a form of administrative autonomy. These efforts were viewed with suspicion both from newly-established institutions and emerging Arab movements which were planning ambitious state and nation-building processes. In this sense, the most important actor was the Ba'th party. Founded on 7 April 1947 by Michel 'Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, the "Arab Socialist Resurrection Party" (*Ḥizb al-Baʿth al-ʿArabī al-Ishtirākī*)[7] presented itself as a genuine Pan-Arab movement that sought to reunify the entire Arab-speaking community by establishing a modern state that stretched, in the words of its members, "from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf". Despite this, the Ba'thist founders and intellectuals did not initially dismiss the notion that Arab nationalism and the Kurds' claims could coalesce together. The main proponent of this vision was the party founder Michel 'Aflaq, who formulated a set of principles and historical considerations aimed at achieving a conciliatory approach towards the Kurds. To start with, he challenged the idea of Arabs' racial and cultural superiority as devised by proto-Ba'thist ideologue Zaki al-Arsuzi, a nationalist thinker and philosopher who had a considerable influence on a number of young Alawite members (Aldoughli 2016, 25–27). Secondly, he avoided using the term "ethnic minorities": in his view, the Kurds should not be classified as a "minority" (*aqalliyya*); rather, they formed an inseparable part of the majority, the Arab population (al-Mawsuli 2002, 4). Since both groups faced the same adversaries (the Western powers and Turkey) and aimed to adopt the same economic system (socialism), Kurds and Arabs actually were part of a common, revolutionary and progressive movement (*al-ḥaraka al-taqaddumiyya al-thawriyya*). By contrast, the Kurdish quest for independence would not only have fractured the anti-colonialist front, but it could also persuade other ethno-religious groups to follow suit, ultimately leading to the socio-political fragmentation of the Levant. In this sense, the party had to accomplish a historical and cultural mission (*risāla*) of unifying the Arab-speaking *umma* by respecting and including the other ethnic communities and religious minorities that lived there. Moreover, it "had the duty to address the inclinations of these nationalities [*qawmiyyāt*] toward a specific cultural and social development […]. In this sense, the Ba'th can – or, rather, must – be the party of minorities" (al-Mawsuli 2002, 4). During the 1947 Foundation Congress, 'Aflaq managed to spread his moderate and civic view, aided by the fact that al-Arsuzi had retired to private life a few months before the congress. Hence, the assembly approved the so-called constitution (*dustūr*) which outlined the main party principles and a blueprint for Ba'thism. As for nationalism, Articles 10 and 11 stated that Arabs are not only those who speak Arabic, but also anyone who has lived on Arab soil, sharing a common historical and cultural heritage. In this sense, the constitution tended to equate the Kurdish component with the Arab one, on the condition that the former supported Ba'th goals and the unionist project (Syrian Ba'th Party

[7] Originally *Ḥizb al-Baʿth al-ʿArabī*. The term "socialism" was added in 1952.

1986, 26). On the other hand, Article 43 strongly condemned nomadic communities and tribes, which still represented the majority of Kurds living in the Jazira (*Ibid.*, 30).

The early years of the Ba'th as a political movement were characterized by a severe internal confrontation that restricted its influence on Syrian political life. The draft of the constitution, as mentioned earlier, had left several ideological vacuums over various aspects. The most significant of these involved asserting party priority over nationalist and socialist goals. On one hand, 'Aflaq and al-Bitar supported the union as the ultimate *raison d'être*: they saw the nationalist and independentist tide that was mounting throughout the Middle East as a unique historical opportunity to achieve the *waḥda* and fulfil the long-desired Pan-Arab state. On the contrary, the younger members, most of whom formerly belonged to al-Arsuzi's group, reasoned in more practical terms, as they believed that focusing on economic issues would contribute to the raising of people's living standards thus benefitting the Ba'th in terms of political consensus. The debate became crucial when the party started to cooperate with Akram al-Hawrani, a lawyer based in Hama who had founded the Arab Socialist Party (ASP; *al-Ḥizb al-ʿArabī al-Ishtirākī*) a few years earlier. Being a pragmatic politician with no fondness for ideological debates, al-Hawrani stood in contrast to 'Aflaq's behavior. However, recognizing the positive outcomes of parliamentary cooperation, the two leaders started negotiations in order to fuse together their movements and establish an authentic Pan-Arab and Socialist-oriented political force. The agreement was reached at the end of 1952, but this "marriage of convenience" soon entered into a crisis due to divergences related to the issue of the Jazira's Arabo-Kurdish tribes.

## 3. The Kurdish Movements between Communism and Arab Nationalism

In fact, the necessity to develop the Jazira region had greatly influenced the political orientations of the Kurdish community, to the point that a considerable part of the former Khoybun network had been absorbed by far-left movements. In particular, Communism offered a solution to the most urgent needs of the Kurds living in rural areas: the concepts of class struggle, wealth distribution and internationalism were interpreted as a tool to exit out of isolation, compete with Arab nationalist discourse and obtain political and civil rights (Ahmad 1991, 27–28). During this period, a prominent Kurdish figure was Khaled Bakdash, who had been secretary of the Syrian Communist Party (*al-Ḥizb al-Shuyūʿī al-Sūrī*) since 1933. Between the final years of the Mandate and the early years of the independent republic, Bakdash was able to establish a reputation for himself within both his ethnic group and Arab political circles. As a result, he and the Damascene Kurds were granted permission by the colonel Husni al-Za'im to create a special committee with the purpose of teaching the Kurdish language and organizing cultural events in the capital.[8] It was no coincidence that relations between the community and the central government were established under al-Za'im. As reported by al-Hawrani (1996, 918, n. 2), the colonel lacked genuine Arab nationalist sentiments, to the extent that the socialist leader raised doubts about whether his Kurdish origins might have influenced this approach. Such a perception was reinforced by al-Za'im's decision to appoint Muhsin al-Barazi, another Kurd, as prime minister. Both men were closely aligned with France and the United Kingdom, viewed with favor an economic partnership with the United States and even initiated negotiations with Israel to secure an armistice after the Syrian army suffered heavy defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. In the eyes of Arab nationalists and Ba'thists, all these elements prompted speculation that the government was more inclined to proclaim an autonomous

[8] Document no. 1-71/12 dated 8 February 1952, found in the Emir Farid Chehab Collection, GB165-0384, Box 12, Middle East Centre Archive, St. Antony's College, Oxford. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/kurdish-activities-damascus.

Kurdish state, instead of waging war against Israel and continuing the Pan-Arab unification process. This perception was evident within the Levantine press, which started to refer to Zaim's government as a "Kurdo-military republic" (Seale 1965, 60 and 62).

Another trend that began to emerge was the ideological appeal of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP; *al-Ḥizb al-Sūrī al-Qawmī al-Ijtimāʿī*). Founded by the Lebanese intellectual Antun Saadeh, the party promoted Pan-Syrianism, a unique form of nationalism that yearned for the creation of a Greater Syria – encompassing the entire Levant, the Sinai Peninsula, Mesopotamia, southern Turkey and Cyprus – regardless of religious and ethnic affiliations. Due to SSNP's spread within the national army and minority groups, many Kurds, particularly those who did not endorse leftist ideologies, became members of the party (*Ibid.*, 71). Relations with central government abruptly deteriorated following Adib al-Shishakli's coup in December 1949. Of Kurdish descent and a friend of al-Hawrani, he had been a member of the *Troupes Spéciales* and remained in good relations with the French after independence. This linkage was due to the common intent to modernize the Jazira. In that period the region was mostly a barren land inhabited by several Kurdish tribes, together with the Anatolian refugees and a small Arab presence. The province was undergoing a severe state of underdevelopment, as it was plagued by endemic diseases like amoebic dysentery and syphilis: "it is losing such western influences – wrote the British ambassador William Montagu-Pollock with an insuperable colonial-minded style – as it may have gained at the time of the French Mandate and is sinking back into an oriental provincialism" (Priestland and Seale 2005, 701–712).[9] Nevertheless, the central government was aware that the land was more than fertile enough for corn and cotton cultivation, making the Jazira a valuable asset for the national economy.

Despite his connections with the Arab socialists, al-Shishakli, once in power, implemented a strong authoritarian rule: by the end of 1951 he had suspended every political freedom, including the Kurds' right to hold cultural activities, and had abolished the multi-party parliamentary system. As soon as the Arab Liberation Movement (ALM; *Ḥarakat al-Taḥarrurr al-ʿArabī*) was formed,[10] al-Shishakli severed ties with al-Hawrani and outlawed the Ba'th. After spending several months in exile in Lebanon and Italy, 'Aflaq, al-Bitar and al-Hawrani returned to Syria and met with other Syrian leaders in Homs to create a unified opposition bloc called the National Front (*al-Jabha al-Waṭaniyya*). During this period, al-Hawrani attempted to engage with Khaled Bakdash: both intended to create a long-lasting alliance between the (Kurdish) farmers and the Syro-Arab Left. At the beginning of the 1950s, the SCP leader had assumed control of the *Shorsh*,[11] also known as the Kurdish Communist Party, along with other armed movements in the Jazira region. He was also in contact with other pro-Marxist Kurds located in Iran, Turkey and Iraq. In addition, the SCP leader demonstrated great ability in mingling with government and army officials. For example, Muhammad Ashmar, one of the key figures of the Great Arab Revolt, assisted him in preparing the campaign for the parliamentary elections, which he eventually won, becoming the first Communist to enter a Middle Eastern parliament. As a Syrian parliamentarian, he

[9] Confidential dispatch no. 1 from Mr. W. Montagu-Pollock, Damascus, to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 3 January 1951, relating to the development of resources in the Jezireh [FO371/91858]. Confidential Dispatch no. 1-11002/1/51 EY1104/1.

[10] Although the ALM espoused Pan-Arab ideas, it primarily represented the personal political platform of al-Shishakli after the dissolution of the other Syrian parties. As noted by Patrick Seale (1965, 125–26), the movement was a loose combination of disparate elements: its internal structure was modeled after the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, while its ideology closely resembled Ba'thist principles.

[11] The *Shorsh* was founded in Iran in 1947 but soon moved its headquarters to the town of al-Qamishli, exerting a strong influence over the urban Kurdish communities and the tribes. See document no. 14/B dated 1950, found in Emir Farid Chehab Collection, GB165-0384, Box 2, File 14B/2, Middle East Centre Archive, St. Antony's College, Oxford, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/kurdish-groupings, and GB165-0384, Box 2, File 13B/2 year 1951, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/kurdish-parties-and-societies.

soon became friends with Khaled al-'Azm, a respected politician and former prime minister, although at that time he was the leader of a small reformist group, the Democratic Bloc (Naddaf 1993, 35).

Initially, socialism was the *fil rouge* which connected Bakdash with Arab nationalists, as both called for the improvement of peasants' and workers' living conditions: the struggle against wealthy landowners actually involved many Kurdish peasants who inhabited the Jazira. However, as the Pan-Arab movement gained momentum throughout the Levant and Egypt, he realized that economic issues alone would not be enough to strengthen the alliance with the Ba'thists. For this reason, he decided to take it a step further and play the nationalist card instrumentally: he justified his cooperation with the *qawmiyyūn* by professing to be an Arab, rather than a Kurd. He explained that he, having studied Arabic and spent most of his life in Damascus, considered himself as fully Arabized (*mustaʿrab*) despite his Kurdish origins. Following a logic that resonated with 'Aflaq's view, the leader stated that Kurds who had been living with the Arabs for a significant period should be automatically equated to the major ethnic component of the country. According to him, this was confirmed by the fact that Kurdish politicians had already assumed offices and held administrative positions since the Mandate period, demonstrating a considerable level of integration within Syria's political landscape (Naddaf 1993, 86–87).

## 4. The Baʿthist-Kurdish Ideological Convergence during the Apogee of Pan-Arabism and the United Arab Republic Experiment

In January 1954 the National Bloc contributed to instigating the Druze revolt that caused the downfall of al-Shishakli's rule. This favored the comeback of the multi-party system and marked the beginning of the "democratic phase" of Syrian political life, which lasted until the proclamation of the United Arab Republic (Dib 2011, 144). As political rights were gradually restored, the Kurds seized the opportunity to further develop their network and resume cultural activities. One of the deputies of the ALM was Ahmad Jafar Shaykh Ismail Zadeh. Unlike the majority of the other Kurdish politicians, he originated from the 'Afrin canton, which was then known as Jabal al-Akrad, meaning the "Kurds' Mountain". Despite being one of the founders of the ALM and a friend of al-Shishakli, Ahmad Jafar was able to successfully participate in the first free elections of the country held in September 1954. Three months later Jafar, in contrast to the actions of the Damascene and Jazira's Kurds, during a session of the *Majlis al-Nuwwāb*, requested that the government enact a sort of "Arabization plan" for the people living in the Jabal. This project, as Barut writes (2013, 704–706), can be considered a precursor to those implemented by the Ba'thists during the 1960s. The first request occurred in December 1954, and it was followed by another one at the twenty-fourth parliamentary session:

> There are nearly a million people in the border areas who do not speak [the] Arabic language. In this regard, I say: I requested, in a previous speech, the broadcasting of Syrian radio in the Kurdish language to ensure that the people of those areas have a genuine Arab orientation [*tawjīhan ʿarabiyyan ṣaḥīḥan*], and some individuals have interpreted my words as being racist. Gentlemen, I want to assure you that I am a loyal patriot who seeks rights and justice for the areas I represent here, and I take this opportunity to appeal to the government ('Abdu 'Ali 2003, 397–398).

Despite his purportedly "moderate" and "inclusive" approach toward minorities, 'Aflaq never accepted Kurdish membership to the party, as his Arabism ultimately excluded any other ethnic group. In fact, the core philosophical framework of the Ba'th's Christian founder was shaped by his academic education in Europe, where he was profoundly influenced by both the civic approach of the French school of thought and the German Romantics who devised the nation as a living, unchangeable and eternal entity (Aldoughli 2016, 20 and 2022,

129). Additionally, ‘Aflaq’s metaphysical perspective (Rapone 2024, 200 and 207) led him to elaborate a holistic approach (*shumūliyya*) aimed at addressing the internal issues of the Arab world and maintaining its unity and internal cohesion. This vision was arguably reinforced by the fact that many Kurds had already aligned themselves with the main opponents of the Ba‘th: the Communist movement led by Khaled Bakdash and the followers of Antun Saadeh. According to the founder, both of these groups pursued ideological and political agendas that openly collided with the Pan-Arab project. ‘Aflaq labeled these factions as part of a broader “regionalist trend” (*al-tiyār al-iqlīmī*), a derogatory term first used by Syrian thinker Sati’ al-Husri (1985). Indeed, *iqlīmiyya* identified the enemies of the *waḥda* who sought to fragment the Arabic community, promote confessional and tribal cleavages, and seek accommodation with Western and imperialist forces (‘Alloush 1979, 16–17).

‘Aflaq left the problem of minorities within the Arab world unsolved until April 1955, when he published an intervention, in the form of a short essay, entitled “Our liberal nationalism in the face of religious and racial discrimination” (*Qawmiyyatunā al-mutaḥarrira amām al-tafarruqa al-dīniyya wa al-ʿunṣuriyya*). This actually consisted of a transcript from a speech that he had delivered to a class of Moroccan students after one of them, who had Berber origins, asked the founder how the Ba‘th would have dealt with non-Arab speaking communities. The reply given by ‘Aflaq still followed the principles contained in the 1947 *dustūr* but offered a more comprehensive theoretical framework. To start with, the word “Arabism” used alone was too imprecise and could have caused confusion if not properly clarified by other terms. Ba‘thism in fact did not embrace the backward, narrow-minded and extremist nationalistic views (*qawmiyya rajaʿiyya mughlaqa wa mutaʿaṣṣaba*) that glorified the Arab race and Arab blood, as Arsuzi’s theory did. Instead, it adopted a civilian and humanitarian (*insāniyya*) perspective, acknowledging that Arabness (*ʿurūba*) was considered equal to the nationalist theories elaborated by other ethnic groups. He argued that if the Arab world were divided according to religious and ethnic criteria, it would soon face socio-political fragmentation and chaos, ultimately succumbing to the external forces of imperialism and colonialism that sought to destroy it (‘Aflaq 1986, 179). Hence, Ba‘th nationalism was liberal (*mutaḥarrir*) in the sense that it recognized the rights of religious and ethnic minorities living within the Arab world. At the same time, it acted as a protective umbrella by defending them from external threats. Referring to the condition of the Kurds, he stated:

> No one is preventing the Kurds from learning their language, as long as [they] abide by the state’s laws and do not represent a threat to the state. There is no one that is preventing the Christian sects, for example, from practicing their religious rituals and Christian culture within this shared Arab culture. Our concept is very different from Nazi nationalism’s one, which believes that there is a superior race with distinct traits that must be purified of everything, leading to the persecution of those who do not meet the conditions in terms of lineage and customs… Arabism is humanity, and we perceive our Arab nationalism as a genuine expression of true humanity. And because it is a sanctification of the nationalities of others, we sanctify this feeling among all other peoples (*Ibid.*, 182).

In addition, ‘Aflaq reinforced nationalist inclusiveness by emphasizing two ideological underpinnings: democracy (*dīmūqrāṭiyya*)[12] and socialism (*ishtirākiyya*). The first one would have granted human and political rights, while the second one would have reinforced a sort of egalitarian and collectivistic vision that went beyond ethno-sectarian affiliations. He labeled those who opposed his project as agents at the service of imperialist forces and enemies of the Ba‘th party. A similar scene occurred a few years later, in the summer of 1957, when a party delegation headed by ‘Aflaq and Jamal al-Atassi attended a conference in Athens on Mediterranean national movements. Even though the main theme of the meeting was the Algerian war of

[12] In Ba‘thist literature, this term has been translated into Arabic more vaguely as *ḥurriya*, meaning “liberty”.

independence, some Kurds who attended the event drew attention to the repression they were experiencing in the Middle East. In his intervention, 'Aflaq persuaded them by reiterating the principles expressed in the *Qawmiyyatunā* speech, explaining that Arabs and Kurds were united in confronting common challenges and experiencing the same difficulties. Commenting on that episode,[13] the intellectual Jamal al-Atassi (al-Mawsuli 1985, 15–45) conceded that 'Aflaq's approach, although guided by noble and good intentions, reflected his naivety and lack of pragmatism. This vision was also confirmed by an important Lebanese and Pan-Arab intellectual, Mustafa Dandashli (1979, 94), who labeled the founder's vision as simplistic and detached from the complexity of reality. Eventually, this weakness, along with leadership issues emerging within the party's hierarchy, resulted in a dramatic ideological and political shift in the following years.

The rise of radical nationalism also affected the Kurdish cultural landscape. Bakdash's Communist Party, which had been dominant among the community, began to lose influence. As land reforms were approved and the power of landowners started to decrease, a segment of Kurdish society was no longer satisfied with the SCP's goals. During those years, new associations and movements flourished, including the Freedom Bloc (1955), the Kurdish Culture Revival Association (1955) and the Kurdish Knowledge and Cooperation Association (1956). Additionally, Kurdish student groups began to emerge in Aleppo and at the University of Damascus (Mizani 2004, 94–106). This fervor laid the basis for the emergence of a brand-new actor. In the summer of 1956 a group of intellectuals, including 'Abd al-Hamid Darwish, Osman Sabri and Hamza Nawryan, formed the "Democratic Party of the Kurds in Syria" (*Partiya Kurdên Dimiqratên Sûrî*) with the assistance of Nur el-Din Zaza and Jalal al-Talabani, based on the model of the homonymous Iraqi movement (referred to as the KDP). The party proclamation occurred one year later, on 14 June 1957, under the name of the "Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria" (KDPS; *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê li Sûriyê*)[14]– around the same time of 'Aflaq's speech at the Athens conference – when the three leaders met in Aleppo to establish the Central Committee and began their political activities (Darwish 2000, 14–15 and 20). Although it is difficult to assess the early stages of the party due to the scarcity of primary sources, it is possible to speculate, as Hosheng Ossi (2016) does, that the Kurds might have somehow benefited from the assistance of Syrian Ba'thists. According to the journalist 'Abd al-Hamid Darwish, one of the KDPS's founders asked the Syrian Arab nationalist forces to help the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq (KDP) build an alliance against the Iraqi Hashemite monarchy, which was aligned with the United Kingdom, and consequently showed hostility towards emerging socialist and Pan-Arab movements (*Ibid.*). This version of events is also confirmed by Jalal Talabani (1970, 104), the future leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), who collaborated with relevant Iraqi movements that year to create an anti-government political platform known as the "National Union Front" (*Jabhat al-Ittiḥād al-Waṭānī*). The coalition included the Ba'th party, the Communists, the National Democratic Party, the Independence Party and the Kurdish Unified National Democratic Party. The adherents agreed to set aside their differences and defend people's interests under the slogans of a "common Arab and Kurdish struggle" (*Ibid.*, 104–105). Talabani also sent a delegation to Syria and engaged in talks with representatives of Akram al-Hawrani, who belonged to the socialist wing of the Syrian Ba'th (*Ibid.*).

[13] This account is reported by Jamal al-Atassi who wrote the introduction to al-Mawsuli's handbook (1985) on Kurdish history and culture. It is hard to identify the Congress mentioned by the author. The website *Syrian History* reports that on 18 August 1957 a Syrian delegation attended an International Law Conference in the Hellenic capital, but its representatives were Abdul Wahab Homad, a member of the People's Party, and Mohammad al-Fadel, a Ba'thist (http://www.syrianhistory.com/en/photos/8329?tag=Al-Inshaa+newspaper). In any case, the initiative demonstrated the cultural and geopolitical convergence between the Greeks and the Arab nationalists which reached its zenith during the Suez crisis (Hatzivassiliou 1992, 68–69).

[14] In Arab and Kurdish literature, the name is often abbreviated as *Partiya*. Alternatively, Arabic sources refer to KDPS by translating it as *Ḥizb al-Dīmuqrāṭī al-Kurdistānī fī Sūriyā*.

Based on the Iraqi accord, the KDPS attempted to replicate the partnership with the Communist Party. However, tensions arose quickly because Bakdash was concerned that the rise of a powerful Kurdish organization might erode his popular support in the region. This behavior demonstrates that the old leftist network was gradually being replaced by the broader nationalist movement. Even in the Jazira, where Bakdash's influence was still noteworthy, the renowned intellectual and poet Cigerxwîn abandoned the SCP and formed a personal movement called *Āzādī*, meaning "freedom", which soon joined the KDPS. A few months earlier, in 1956, Darwish, Sabri and Nawryan had drafted and signed a political program in a private house near Nijmeh Square in Damascus. The program reflected a clear nationalist blueprint, somewhat similar to 'Aflaq's vision. In fact, Article 1 did not explicitly call for the Kurds' independence from Syria; rather, it urged the central government to ensure social and political rights for the community, preventing "their brothers from making mistakes and protecting them from injustice and poverty" (KDPS 1956, 1). The *Partiya* defined itself as a "progressive and liberal" (*taqaddumī wa taḥarrurī*) force that worked to establish a popular democracy and guarantee human rights (*Ibid.*, Article 2). It also aligned with the Pan-Arab vision by acknowledging the presence of foreign and colonialist threats and stating its willingness to cooperate with every progressive movement in the country. In relation to Kurdistan, the party prioritized defending the Kurdish community, with the "help of our Arab brothers", living in Turkey, a state that has been labelled as a "colonial fortress" (*Ibid.*, 2, Articles 6–7).

To summarize, the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the 1950s was made possible by three factors. First, the development of local cultural networks between the French Mandate and the early years of the post-independence period. Second, the liberal phase of Syrian republican life that began with the downfall of al-Shishakli's regime in 1954. Third, the ideological convergence between Iraqi-Syrian Arab nationalist and socialist forces, including the 'Aflaq-led Ba'th. In this sense, the proclamation of the United Arab Republic (UAR; *al-Jumhūriyya al-ʿArabiyya al-Muttaḥida*) marked a sudden halt to Kurdish political revival. The KDPS was aware that Michel 'Aflaq and his colleagues had entered into contact with the Egyptian President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir to discuss the possibility of unifying Syria and Egypt into a single state that would have represented the first step in the long-desired Pan-Arab process. Endowed with enormous charisma and pragmatism, al-Nasir actually lacked a proper ideological education. During the 1952 "July Revolution" that overthrew the monarchy, al-Nasir, like the other Free Officers, was primarily motivated by a deep-seated animosity towards the British Empire, which had ruled Egypt and still maintained control over its most valuable asset, the Suez Canal. Only after the Bandung Conference in 1955 did al-Nasir unequivocally present himself as the new champion of the (Pan-)Arab cause, becoming a staunch opponent of Israel and the former colonial powers in the Middle East. Even though this posture aligned with 'Aflaq's interests, negotiations between the latter and al-Nasir were characterized by tensions and disagreements over the terms of unity. In the face of the Egyptian president's uncompromising behavior, the Syrians finally had to accept his demands – the most controversial among these being the dissolution of every Syrian political organization, including the Ba'th – and, on 22 February 1958, the UAR came into effect after a popular plebiscite.

Initially, the *Partiya* maintained a positive attitude toward the union between the two states. Since al-Nasir was regarded as the leader of Third-World liberation movements, the Kurds had voted massively in favor of the union at the referendum (Ossi 1962, 13). They had also sent a message to him, requesting formal acknowledgment of the Kurdish presence in Syria by the new state. In previous years, the Egyptian president had shown a particular sympathy for Kurdish issues, which was strengthened by his strong opposition to the Iraqi Hashemite monarchy. This was evident in 1957, when al-Nasir, as a gesture of goodwill, permitted the

broadcasting of a Kurdish-speaking radio program in Cairo called Sawt al-Akrad, the "Kurdish Voice" (Musa 2013, 82).[15]

The Arab-Kurd convergence was reinvigorated by the dramatic political events that took place in Iraq on 14 July 1958, when the Hashemite dynasty was ousted through a bloody coup d'état led by Brigadier 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and Colonel 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif, members of the "Free Officer Movement". Despite the junta's evident pro-Nasserist influence, Qasim was reluctant to join the UAR due to his strong connections with the Iraqi Communist Party (Batatu 1978, 789). Determined to maintain the state's independence from al-Nasir's influence, he removed the pro-unionist 'Arif from his offices and sent him into "exile" in West Germany on 30 September by appointing him as the new ambassador in Bonn. Fearing that Qasim was distancing himself from the UAR's positions and goals, 'Aflaq had arrived in Baghdad the month before, with the aim of persuading army officers and nationalists of the necessity of uniting with Cairo and Damascus. The founder also sought the consensus of the Kurdish community by delivering one of his historical lectures to a class of Kurdish students. He used the figure of Saladin, the Kurdish general who defeated the Crusaders and reconquered Jerusalem at the end of the 12th century, to draw a comparison with the present time and emphasize the enduring bond between Kurds and Arabs. In his words:

> We are keen on freedom for all human beings, and we are ready to make sacrifices in order to defend freedom worldwide. How can we not defend the freedom of our brothers who have lived with us for hundreds of years, with no distinction between us and them, and when we have been united by various bonds? […] We have love and brotherhood for you [*naḥnu lakum maḥabba wa al-ikhāʾ*], and this concern is not only for you and your interests, but also for our homeland's safety, stability, contentment, and cooperation […]. You have our full support and love, and I believe, and I am confident that your affections, my Kurdish brothers, are just as strong as our affection for you. You are from this beautiful land, and no force can create a gap between us and you […] ('Aflaq 1989, 28–29).

Baghdad's hesitancy to adhere to the Pan-Arab union unveiled a growing dissatisfaction with al-Nasir's modus operandi. Since the very beginning, the UAR had shown an evident asymmetry in terms of power balance: as the Syrian parties were dissolved, al-Nasir had the chance to extend his overwhelming authority over the Levantine country, rebranded as the "Northern Region" (*al-Iqlīm al-Shimālī*). This process was completed by the end of 1958, when the president, after taking over the Syrian army and intelligence services, crushed the last Syrian political groups operating clandestinely, most notably the SCP. As Bakdash went into exile in Moscow and regional deputies were transferred to Cairo, Syria was easily brought under Egyptian rule. The long-envisioned Pan-Arab state was soon definitively transformed into an authoritarian, highly centralized policy regime that undermined the existence of the Ba'th itself.

In this scenario, al-Nasir, despite his initial openness towards the Kurds, changed his approach by sticking to a radical notion of Pan-Arabism that excluded the existence of other ethnic minorities. By the first anniversary of the UAR proclamation, the Chairman of the Executive Council of the Northern Region, Colonel 'Abd al-Hamid Sarraj, had expelled Kurdish officers from the army and banned the community's cultural events, music and publications (Tejel Gorgas 2006, 115–116). Finally, he ordered a first wave of arrests that targeted KDPS members (Nazdar 1980, 215). What is more relevant, however, is that during that period Kurdish literature began to criticize the Ba'thists for their actions. For instance, the plan to establish a Kurdish radio station in Damascus, modeled after Cairo's, was reportedly halted due to the "conflict with 'Aflaqist fascist-like mentality prevalent in the Northern Region" (Ossi 1962, 13). More details are available in

[15] The Kurdish broadcasting in Cairo continued until February 1968, when the government was forced to shut it down in accordance with austerity measures implemented after the defeat in the Six-Day War (Musa 2013, 91).

Darwish's (2000, 30–31) account: al-Nasir had indeed approved the broadcasting channel and sent Kamal al-Din Rif'at to Syria to discuss the terms with KDPS spokesperson Rashid Hanu, but the negotiation was obstructed by "chauvinist Arab intermediaries". Given the critical situation, in September 1958 the KDPS Central Committee held a series of meetings with former Khoybun cadres to revise certain aspects of the political program. Alongside stressing the need to restore the democratic system in Syria, the group also considered the possibility of liberating and reunifying the Kurdistan region. Regarding this issue, the secondary literature provide different versions: while Mizani (2004, 119) suggests that the *Partyia* was far from being enthusiastic about the independence struggle, Ahmad (1991, 25) states that the term "reunification" (*tawḥīd*) was merely a slogan that had no impact on the political course. Given the lack of Ba'thist sources explaining party relations with the Kurds during the UAR, it is difficult to assess the actual influence of the party over the rest of the Syrian forces. It could be assumed that, given the critical situation the Ba'th found itself in following its formal dissolution, the National Command members and some pro-Ba'th officers, no longer responding to 'Aflaq's leadership, had adopted a more rigid and radical approach in managing non-Arab movements, similar to Egypt's repression of the Communists. Alternatively, it is possible that their aim was the disruption of a dangerous alliance between al-Nasir and the Kurds that could undermine the role of the Ba'th within the United Arab Republic.

However, relations between al-Nasir and the Kurds were quickly deteriorating. As the rift between Cairo and Baghdad deepened, the KDP sided with Iraqi nationalist forces that opposed the union with the UAR. This position probably stemmed from the challenges faced by the KDP's Syrian branch, which was enduring Nasserist purges and Ba'thist oppressive attitudes, fostering an atmosphere of mutual suspicion between the end of 1958 and the early months of 1959. During that period, al-Nasir and al-Sarraj conspired with the Ba'thists to plan a coup in the city of Mosul aiming to overthrow Qasim and bring Baghdad into the UAR's orbit. Abd al-Wahab al-Shawwaf, an Iraqi colonel belonging to the Free Officers Movement, initiated the uprising, but it quickly descended into a bloody conflict based on confessional, tribal and class divisions before being quelled by the Iraqi army. The revolt turned out to be a complete failure for the already fragile unionist front, which became more oppressive towards its adversaries. The Kurdish political movements, who greatly contributed to thwarting al-Shawwaf forces alongside the Communists, suffered a new wave of repression, while the Syrian propaganda machine strengthened its anti-Qasim rhetoric. This led the community to definitely adopt a fierce anti-Nasserist and anti-Ba'thist stance. A harsh critique took place in June 1959 when the Syrian and Iranian Committees of the Kurdish Democratic Party issued a statement which appeared in the Kurdish newspaper *al-Ḥaqīqa* ("The Truth"), warning about the worsening conditions of the community. They blamed the "terrorist and backward regime" for imprisoning several party members and the "fascist Ba'thist authorities" for racial discrimination, as the community was deprived of any civil and political rights. Furthermore, they accused the Ba'th of publishing a fabricated article attributed to the Kurdish poet 'Abd al-Qadir al-'Aziz, in which he supposedly declared his love and belonging to Arabism (KDPS, 1959). On the contrary, the document praised the Iraqi republic for suppressing the al-Shawwaf revolt and expressed their sentiment for the friendship between Arabs and Kurds.

## 5. From the breakdown of the United Arab Republic to the Ba'th 8 March Revolution

After the Mosul incident, the unionist government initiated a harsh retaliation in Syria and on 12 August 1960 a considerable number of KDPS cadres were arrested, including the president Nur el-Din Zaza. In the wake of the repression, a controversial incident took place on 13 November 1960 in Amuda, a small town in

al-Hasakah province near the Turkish border. According to the survivors' accounts (Nami 2003), the authorities forced the local Kurdish community, including schoolchildren, to watch a film about the Algerian revolution. During the screening, a fire broke out in the cinema hall, killing more than 200 children. As no official investigation was launched, the Kurds of Amuda held the Arab soldiers (who had locked the entrance door during the projection) and the central government responsible for the tragic event, which left a deep wound in the Syrian Kurdish community that is still remembered to this day.

However, the chaotic situation in the "Northern Region" had spread dissatisfaction among Syrian army officers. One of them, General Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi, staged a coup on 29 September 1961, ultimately separating Syria from al-Nasir's rule: the so-called *infiṣāl*, meaning "separation", prematurely ended the long-desired Pan-Arab union. Even though the Republican political parties were reinstated and participated in upcoming elections, Nahlawi's junta continued to maintain a tight control over parliamentary life. Contrary to the democratic phase of 1954–1958, Arab movements viewed the Kurdish community with suspicion, seeing them as a threat to state integrity. Three factors formed the basis of this attitude. The first one is related to the socio-economic development of the Jazira started under al-Shishakli. Throughout the 1950s, the size of the Jazira-Kurdish community had increased remarkably, as had the population of the Jazira, which grew from 162,145 inhabitants in 1952 to 293,140 in 1959 (Barut 2013, 695–696). This was due to two main reasons: the improvement in quality of life enhanced by various agrarian reforms and the flow of migration coming from Turkey during the first half of the decade, which "overturned the balance of power between Arabs and Kurds in the Jazira".[16] In autumn 1962, the Syrian press warned of the "Kurdish danger" in a land that had gained geo-strategic significance. The area had become "one of the wealthiest regions of the country, providing 40% of the cotton harvests", not to mention the discovery of oil fields in al-Qamishli, which offered additional prospects for development. As a result, the increasing importance of the Jazira region may have strengthened Kurdish political quests for self-determination.[17] Secondly, this perception was reinforced by another factor related to the events taking place in neighboring Iraq, where the Kurdish tribes, a key actor with strong support in the northern provinces, had started a rebellion against the central government, and were promptly backed by Mustafa Barzani's clan (McDowall 2007, 309–310). The third factor is related to the ideological and political changes of the Ba'th itself, which underwent a chaotic power struggle after the abrupt end of the UAR. Since 'Aflaq and his old guard had lost credibility in managing relations with al-Nasir and the Iraqi *qawmiyyūn*, the *de facto* leadership passed over to the officers, while the other members decided to leave the group and form new Nasserist and Socialist movements. Despite the Ba'th's internal strife and divisions, its ideology had deeply influenced the entire nationalist spectrum, benefiting from the outlawing of its two major competitors, the SSNP and Bakdash's SCP. For all these reasons, the conservative government of Bashir al-Azma, supported by a significant portion of the Ba'th, adopted an anti-Kurdish stance which quickly led to the exclusion of the community from Syria's socio-political life. On 23 August 1962, Decree no. 93 was issued, thus revoking Syrian citizenship from at least 120,000 Kurds (Darwish 2000, 59) and mandating a census in the al-Hasakah governorate, the northwesternmost part of the Jazira, to determine the size of the community.

The repressive measures intensified following the Ba'th party's rise to power on the 8 March 1963. In the days following the coup, the Ba'thist officers hurried to confirm that the new regime would respect military cohesion and would not expel members belonging to ethnic minorities (al-Hawrani 1996, 3282). However, the

[16] See the "Question Kurde en Syrie" report sent by the French *chargé d'affaires* in Syria, Pierre Susini, to the French Foreign Minister, Maurice Couve de Murville, Damascus, 7 November 1962. Document no. 102-AL, Sy-VII, dossier no. 1, *carton* QONT-1043, CADMAE. The extent of this migration flow was also exacerbated by the high number of Kurds who continued to leave Southern Turkey as a consequence of the 1937–1938 Dersim rebellion and the growing tensions between Ankara and the Kurds living in Anatolia (Barut, 158–163).

[17] "Question Kurde en Syrie", dossier no. 1.

perspective had definitively changed: ‘Aflaq’s moderate and pro-democracy vision was reinterpreted in Ba‘thism, which considered Arabness and Islam as the unique foundations of Syrian national identity. Instead, the Kurds were viewed as being a result of imperialist and colonial policies of the past, a sort of constructed identity that needed to be re-assimilated – not equaled, as suggested by ‘Aflaq – to *ʿurūba*. This concept was summarized in the following official communiqué from the Ba’thists: “all residents of Arab countries are Arabs, and non-Arabs must become Arabs or leave”, despite the fact that the “Kurdish liberation movement had raised the slogan of Arab-Kurdish brotherhood” (Mella 2004, 25).

The first Ba‘thist legislative action was Decree no. 521 issued by the party’s Regional Command on 24 June 1963, which allocated 138,853 hectares of land to Arab newcomers, known as *mustawṭinūn* “colonists” in Kurdish primary sources (Jaziri 2017, 500). The ethnic community’s reaction was not long in coming: in July 1963 the newspaper *Sawt al-Akrād*, “The voice of the Kurds”, published an article issued by the *Partiya* Central Committee vehemently accusing the regime of “genocide” against the Kurdish people in both Iraq and Syria. Indeed, “the Aflaqist Ba‘thist rulers of Iraq had just shown themselves as enemies of freedom and democracy, by killing and exterminating thousands of patriots and democrats in Iraq […]. The Ba‘th’s Syrian Aflaqists stood with these policies aimed at committing genocide and violating the most basic human rights” (Darwish 2000, 69–71). Tensions between Arabs and Kurds were soon exacerbated as Damascus decided that summer to assist the Iraqi Ba‘thist government – which had seized power on 8 February, one month before the Syrians – in suppressing the Kurdish insurgency. In early June 1963, Minister of Information Sami al-Jundi, a member of the party’s old guard, confessed to the French Ambassador Pierre Sébilleau that the Syrians were providing support to the Iraqi army against the Kurds, but only with a “small contingent”. In his report, Sébilleau confirmed that Damascus showed little concern for the rebellion, as evidenced by the “symbolic” troops sent to Northern Iraq. Furthermore, he also highlighted a curious diplomatic effort that could be seen as the last attempt at mediation carried out by Michel ‘Aflaq as “leader” of the Syrian Ba‘th in addressing the Kurdish issue:

> I believe that the most important intervention by the Syrian Ba‘th was not military in nature, quite the opposite, and that it consisted of the approaches [*avances*] that Mr. Michel Aflaq allegedly made very recently in Paris and Lausanne to the representatives of the Kurdish rebellion. Approaches that, it is believed here, would have had little success.[18]

The final rift between the regime-party and the ethnic minority occurred the following autumn. In October the Sixth National Congress was held in Damascus, marking a political breakthrough from an ideological point of view. Parliamentary democracy and ‘Aflaqist concepts were definitively dismissed; instead, socialism and Marxism became the theoretical underpinnings for the state’s development and industrialization. As a consequence, the Jazira soon became the core region for implementing these modernization projects. The amalgam of authoritarianism, Arab nationalism and socialism led to the outright denial of Kurdish rights and autonomy, with immediate consequences. On 12 November 1963, a few days after the Congress, Lieutenant Muhammad Talab Hilal, chief of the security police in al-Hasaka and a member of the Ba‘th, published a pamphlet entitled “National, Political and Social Study of the Province of Jazira” (*Dirāsa ʿan Muḥāfaẓat al-Jazīra min al-Nawāḥī al-Qawmiyya al-Ijtimāʿiyya al-Siyāsiyya*). From the outset of the document, it is evident that Hilal tried to delegitimize the Kurdish quest for autonomy by denying the existence of a genuine ethnic minority in the Jazira and expressing denigratory ideas and offensive concepts. According to the author, the presence of the Kurdish community in the Jazira was the result of a strange and odd mixture made up by

[18] See “La Syrie et la rebellion kurde d’Irak” report sent by the French Ambassador, Pierre Sébilleau, to the French Foreign Minister, Maurice Couve de Murville, Damascus, 11 June 1963. Document no. 575-AL, Sy-VII, dossier no. 1, *carton* QONT-1043, CADMAE.

different populations that had inhabited the region throughout the centuries. Given that, he asserts that its customs and traditions were miscellaneous and not homogenous. The lieutenant depicted the Kurds as a brutal and uncivilized people who did not deserve the status of an ethnic minority. He also affirmed that Kurdish is far from being accepted as a language; instead, it is a collection of "dialects" (*lahjāt*) not mutually intelligible. "We conclude", stated Hilal, "that there is no language because it [the Jazira] lacks the components of a nation. This entails that there is no national homeland for the Kurds, but only a people who live in the mountains" (Hilal 2003, 4).

## 6. Conclusions

Hilal's pamphlet marked the final stage of the Ba'thist strategy regarding the Kurds, paving the way for subsequent demographic engineering projects designed to eliminate the community's identity and presence in Syria.

As this paper demonstrates, the Ba'thist approach to the Kurdish issue has proven to be opaque and has evolved significantly over the course of a decade. In the initial phase of its political activity, Arab and Kurdish nationalists converged on several key issues, particularly the need to improve living standards in rural areas and enhance the socio-economic fabric of the Jazira. However, from the outset, a competition emerged within the party. On one hand, the socialist wing, led by Akram al-Hawrani, sought to engage with Kurdish Communists to diminish the influence of landowners in the Syrian economic and political sphere. On the other hand, 'Aflaq, a staunch anti-Marxist thinker, attempted to reconcile the political aspirations of the ethnic minority with those of the Arabs by acknowledging, albeit ambiguously, that the Kurdish cause was parallel and complementary to the goals of Pan-Arabism. Although it is challenging to determine whether this approach stemmed from a genuine ideological conviction or was merely a strategy response to the cultural and political climate of the 1950s, it can be argued that 'Aflaq endeavored to balance his metaphysical Weltanschauung with political necessities by establishing a connection with the Kurds in order to counter Hawrani and his socialist followers.

However, the subtleties of Aflaq's vision implied that the Kurdish cause should not be disregarded; nevertheless, it remained in a position of subalternity and ancillary to the overarching Pan-Arab project. This moderate approach persisted as long as 'Aflaq maintained influence over the party base, until the establishment of the United Arab Republic. Subsequently, the increasing polarization between Marxists and radical nationalists resulted in a swift yet dramatic shift in perspective. The officers who orchestrated the 8 March revolution rejected the fundamental characteristics of Kurdish identity and history, viewing the community not as an ethnicity to be integrated into the anti-imperialist struggle, but rather as a group to be completely assimilated through forced Arabization of language and customs. Such assumptions paved the way for the implementation of several repressive policies that peaked during the presidency of Hafez and Bashar Assad.

In addition, this paper has highlighted three main dynamics within the Kurdish political movements. The first focused on socio-economic development by embracing Communism and (partially) rejecting the idea of an independent state and even Kurdish identity, as demonstrated in Bakdash's case. The second one refers to the *Partiya* that, inspired by the emerging Pan-Arab wave in Syria and the activities of the KDP in Iraq, sought to establish an authentic nationalist and secular movement. The third one, represented by Ahmad Jafar Shaykh Ismail Zadeh, showed that a (small) segment of the ethnic minority chose to align with the central government, without making substantial demands for political rights and administrative autonomy.

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