

The Turkmen of Syria: exposed early to assimilation and deportation policies

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Introduction

As it happens with the Empires, in the last couple of decades, the Ottoman Empire suffered of large economic and administrative difficulties. Control of the governors by the capital was weakened, collection of taxes from the economically disturbed populace evoked agitation. The invasion of distant provinces by economically and militarily stronger powers such as England and France affected the religiously inspired attitudes of citizens to the Empire. The discovery of great oil reserves increased the importance of the region. While the reasons for uprising in the European provinces were national and religious, the nationalism, which was brought to the Arabs by western powers, played an important role in dismember of the Empire. (1)

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, many new countries were founded. Except Turkey, non-Turkish governments ruled all these countries. Millions of Turks (2) remained in these newly founded countries. The religio-cultural factors in the western newly founded countries and the nationalistic attitudes in the southern countries against the Ottoman Empire had been directed against the Turks of those regions. Many authorities appeared which showed anti-Turkish attitudes. The position of millions of Turks turned out to be critical in these countries: Iraq, Syria, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Greece.

According to J McCarthy large numbers of Turks in the Balkan were either killed or exiled when the countries rebelled against the Ottoman Empire and became independent. Russian invasions of the Ottoman Balkans and the creation of new Balkan states resulted in the expulsion of more than a million Turks. The exiles eventually settled in Anatolia and Eastern Thrace. (3)

The Turkish names were changed in Bulgaria. They were officially considered Muslims in Greece denied to be mentioned as Turks. Their leader Sadik Ahmet was killed in a suspicious car accident. They were massacred in Yugoslavia. The Turks of Iraq are exposed to sustained assimilation. They have been deported from their regions and forced to change their nationality to the Arabic. Their situation is further worsened after occupation of 2003. The Turks of Syria, which will be discussed in this article, have early and severely suffered from the assimilation policies.

Historical Background

Before the Islamic era, the Turks settled in the Middle East. Both the Romans and Achaemenians adopted the Turks as allies. The Turks played an important role in the Roman - Achaemenian war which took place in today's Tarsus region of Turkey. (4) The Turkic people settled in large numbers in Sasanian Iraq and Syria.

In early Islamic Syria the Turks from Fergana appear firstly in the armies of the caliph of Damascus in 698. (5) The recruitment of Turks was increased largely by the Abbasids until at the time of Mutasim the Turks dominated the army. (6) Eshnaz al-Turki was the first Turkish governor who was appointed by Mutasim over Syria and Egypt (849 – 850). Thereafter Fath Hakan, Yazid Abdullah al-Turki, Muzahim Hakan, Ahmet Muzahim, Urhus Ulug Tarhan and Bayikbak were appointed.

The Turkish tribes under the leadership of Harun Hanoglu settled in the Aleppo region toward the end of the 11th century, while those who were led by Afshin moved towards northern Syria. During the rule of Sultan Baybars, 40 thousand Turkish tents were established in the Aleppo region. In the second half of the 13th century northern Syria turned almost completely into Turkish land. While the Bayat, Avshar, Begdilli and Doger tribes from Bozuklu Turkmen clans inhabited the Aleppo region until Damascus, Yiva, Yuregir, Kinik Bayindir, Salur and Eymur tribes from Uchkochaklar clans inhabited the Leticia and Tripoli region. After the establishment of Syria by Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Selim in 1916, Bayat, Avshar, Begdilli, Doger, Inallu, Kopeklu and Gunduzlu Avshars, Harbendellu, Acurlu, Bahadirlu, Hacillu, Karkin, Kizk, Pecenek, Alayuntlu, Qara Qoyunly and Bugduz established in the Aleppo region. (7)

According to P M Holt, the first Turkish bands had entered Syria in 1064; others followed, at first as allies or auxiliaries of rival Arab chiefs. In 1071 a Turkish chieftain Adsiz seized Jerusalem and overran Palestine and in 1076 captured Damascus from Fatimids. From then, the Turkic sovereignty continued without interruption in Syria for about a millennium. Adsiz handed Damascus to Seljuk (Syrian Seljuk 1092 – 1117), when he was exposed to repeated counterattacks. The Turks established new principalities, and became ready to join in the complex and multipartite game of Syrian politics. They scattered through Syria and with the Arabs dominated the population. Thereafter, they conquered Aleppo, Antioch and Edessa and various Seljuk Amires and Atabegs ruled the other cities of Syria (Atabegs established Aleppo in 1104). (8)

The arrival of Turkic people continued steadily up to and after the Mongol arrival, it reached its climax with the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century. (9, 10)

Reuven Amitai-Preiss mentions, when he talks about the Mamluk - Ilkhanid War 1260-1281: "During this period, a large number of Turks settled in Syria with their families and herds, particularly in the north of the country. This shows that the nomadic pastoralism of the Turko-Mongolian tribes could be practiced to some degree in at least part of the country". (11) In another work Amitai - Preiss dates back the Turkmen settlement in Syria to Seljuk times and that of the Golan Turkmen to 1261. He mentions that about 40,000 Turkmen families entered into Syria in 1274 and 1275 and were settled mainly along the Syrian coast from Gaza toward north. In 1306 and 1307, the governor of the Damascus settled 300 Turkmen families on the coast between Beirut and Antioch. (12)

The Syrian Turkish tribes played an important role during the notorious crusade war. Salahaddin defeated the Crusaders with Turkic contingents of the Zangid army and conquered Egypt, establishing a regime and an army of Turkish type, along the lines laid down by the Seljuks and Atabegs in the East. (13) In the 3rd decade of the 14th century a short-lived Turkish principality was founded in the Albistan region by Dulkaderogullari. In the 19th century, the last waves of Turkic people entered Syria when Russia seized the Caucasus.

The Turks of 16th century Syria were Aleppo, Damascus, Salur and Cogun's Turks. Investigation of the official taxes documents of the 16th century Ottoman Empire, in which the people were registered by their tribe names, demonstrates that the estimated number of Aleppo Turks was 55.405 in 1526, 66.621 in 1536, 61.180 in 1550 and 72.457 in 1570. The Turks of Damascus were approximated to 10.073 in 1568/1570, 11.347 in 1596/1597. That of the Salur and Cogun Turks was 2.219 in 1519. The Turkish tribes of Bayat and Calislu in the Hamah region were recorded separately in the years 1547-52 and 1570-71, which were approximated to 12.887 and 19.565 in 1526-27 and 1536-37, respectively. The total number of the Turks of Syria in 16th century was estimated to be around 100.000. (14)

Population size and territory

As in the other Post Ottoman Empire Founded Countries (POEFCs), there are insufficient sources about the Syrian Turks. The available sources provide highly fluctuating data. Under suppressive racist authorities, the population size of Syrian Turks has never officially been estimated and remained unknown.

The Syrian Turks are found mainly in the Aleppo, Leticia and Damascus provinces in considerable concentration and in the basin of the Euphrates River. There are a large number of Turkish villages and districts in the Leticia province. The main Turkish cities in this region are Kesep, Bucak, Behluliyya, Kebele, Bayir, Incesu, Cercum, Azer and Seman Mountain. In the second half of the last century, due to assimilation policies, a large number of them moved toward the center of the Province, where there are many Turkish quarters. They started to gather in streets and suburbs named in Turkish.

Anywhere in Aleppo, a Turk is easily found to help a Turkish-speaking traveler who speaks no Arabic. According to the province yearbook of Aleppo which was published in 1906, the Turks were found in different concentrations in the following quarters; Hamidiyya, Aziziyya, Selimiyya, Akyon, Altunbogaz, Hamzabeg Hansebil, Harafan, Shakiraga, Sachlihan, Badinjik, Ballibulgur, Tatarlar, Karaman, Chukurova, Kilise, Mahmutbeg, Mistadembeg and Harundere.

Azaz, Bab, Munjib, Kurtdaghi and Jarablus are some of the more than 100 administrative settlements of Aleppo province where Turks can be found in moderately numbers.

The Turkish communities of Hamah city are scattered mainly in the region of Tekkele, which is located on the Lebanon border between Hims and Hamah.

In Damascus, Turks are found in many neighborhoods in the center and in the nearby region called Havran plane.

Referring to the Scott and Taylor and Shora, the free encyclopedia Wikipedia estimates the number of Syrian Turkmen during the Ottoman rule as three millions, which decreased to half after the First World War. Thereafter, this number further decreased. (15)

The book titled "The Struggle for Power in Syria" by van Dam can be considered as one of the rare independent publications, which touch on the number of Turks in Syria. Van Dam estimates the population size of Syrian Turks to be 3% (16), which amounts to 484.000 out of the total population size of Syria of 16,137,899 according to the statistics of 1997. (17)

The other writer who touches on the Syrian Turks partially, particularly those who live around the Capital is A. L. Udovitch. He reports that the following Turkish tribes lived in the vicinity of Damascus, in particular, the eastern regions of al-Marj facing the desert; al-buz Qoyunlu, al-Sauadiya, al-Qibliya, al-Qarakashiya, al-Takhtamriya tribes. He relates al-Fahliya tribe to Hamah region. (18, 19)

According to the World Public Library Edition the Turkic peoples in Syria is divided in 2 groups: Turks and Caucasians. In this book the Turks are presented before the Caucasians whose number is estimated to be about 100,000, while the number of Turks is not given. They live along the lower reaches of the Euphrates River and settled as agriculturalists in the Aleppo area. About 50.000 are concentrated in the south western Havran Province. Al Qunaytirah, the provincial capital which was destroyed in the October 1973 War, was regarded as the Turkish capital; after 1973 many of them moved to Damascus. (20) The authoritative commentator on the Middle East Daniel Pipes puts the Turks of Syria at 3%, and the Caucasians at 3%. (21) In another source they were considered to be 30,000 in 1961, which referred to Hims and Hamah as their region. (22)

According to Ketene (23), the assumed figures relating to the Turkish population size in Syria are just as severely minimized as their kin in Iraq. He approximates their number to 1 million living mainly in 2 provinces, Aleppo and Leticia, and many other sub-districts and villages. The first area expands from the Turkish border to Aleppo and from the border of the Turkish province of Antioch to the Euphrates River. The Turks of this region are a continuation of the Barak tribe of Kilis, Antep and Urfa in Turkey. They populate the following cities Menbich, Bab, Jarabulus, Chobanbeg, Azaz, Qatma, Qarchemish and dozens of villages on the frontier with Turkey. The Atabegian capital of the 11th century, Aleppo, which is now considered the second largest city of Syria, includes an important number of Turkish communities. They live mainly in the ancient citadel. Ketene estimated them around 250,000. The second area with a Turkish population stretches along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea from the northern border of Antioch to Leticia. He estimates the number of Turks only in Leticia about 50,000. Hims and Damascus include a considerable number of Turks. The 10,000 Turks of Qunaytarih (Golan Heights) were dispersed during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Another source approximates the number of Turkish villages in Syria at 523. (Table 1) (24)

In the article of Karabat published in the Turkish electronic newspaper “Hürriyet Daily News” titled “Syrian Turks targeted as scapegoats”, the number of Turks in Syria is estimated at about 800,000 to 1 million, mostly living in Aleppo, the district of Qunaytirah near the border with Israel, Telkele (between Hamah and the Lebanon border), and Azaz (south of Gaziantep). (25)

The Senior Regional Analyst David Nissman approximates the number of Turks in Syria to 250,000. He dates their history in Syria back to the same time as the history of the Turks in Iraq. According to him, they are concentrated in Aleppo; they have also been dispersed throughout the metropolitan areas of Syria. He reports that the Ba'ath Party subjected them to the same assimilation policies and pressures as Baghdad. (26)

An important paper about the Turkmen of Syria was presented to “the First Turkish Language Congress” in Adana on May 5, 2007 by two Syrian Turkmen intellectuals Ahmad Hamdi and Hisham Salih. They localize the major Turkmen concentration in Syria to the Aleppo, Leticia, Humus, Hama and Golan. Their villages in Israel side of Golan are: Kefer Neffakh, Ayn El-Sumsum, Zabya, Gadiyye, Ahmediyye, Gasseniyye, Hafer, Ayn El-Gurra, Mugayyir, Ayn Ayse, Cevize. In many other villages as Xusniyye, Ayn Zivan, Kahtaniye the Turkmen live with Circassians. (27)

Table 1, Turkish villages in Syria

Towns	Villages
Keseb	6
Behluliye	2
Kebele (north)	27
Kebele (east)	8
Kebele (south)	11
Incesu (south)	28
Incesu (east)	29
Cercum Valley (toward the Turkish frontier)	20
Cercum Valley (east)	17
Jebeli Seman (east)	16
Azaz (between Azaz and Afrin River)	17
Azaz (east)	29
Bucak	84
Aleppo (central district)	3
Menbic (between Coban Beg and Menbic)	54
Menbic (south)	15
Jarablus	26
South of Sajir Su	23
South of the frontier of Urfa	59
Total	523

The work of the Arabian writer Sara titled "Minorities in the East of the Mediterranean" (28) is one of the rare books which presents considerable information over the Turks in the Arab countries. He estimated their number in Syria at around 100,000. He dates their arrival to the 7th century. They are mainly found in the Euphrates and al-jazire regions as a continuation of the Iraqi Turks. He points to other groups in the region between the Euphrates and the city of Azaz which is located to the north of Aleppo. They are found in the cities Menbej and Bab, which are near Aleppo. According to Sara the Turks were found also in many cities scattered on the banks of the al-Asi River, for example, Huweyr al-Turkman and Natir. On the north coast of Syria, they live in Ras al-Basit and al-Bayir heights. In the Damascus region they are found in Barak city. The Turks of Jowlan heights live mainly in the cities of Qunaytirah, Hafr, Sandiyana, Gadiyya and Alike. A great many of them were deported after the Arab-Israel war in 1967, who were mostly settled in Damascus. They still preserve their Turkmen language. (27)

Sara approximates the number of Turks in Jordan to 25,000. He comments on the Turks of Palestine and estimates their number to be around 10,000. They were of 7 tribes; Bani Saidan, Bani Alkama, Bani Aza, al-Thabaya, Shikayrat, Tawaliha and Nefnefiyya, who entered Palestine during the crusade wars. These tribes united in the late 19th century under the name Arab al-Turkmen. They live mainly in Merj, Liben, Amir. Turks of Mansi city played an important role in the revolution of 1936 - 1939. With the Turks of Janin they have been exposed to severe hostilities during the war of 1948 and the following Arab-Israel wars. Turks were also found in the Ara valley and on the southern foot of the Karmal Mountains. They are scattered from Yakinam city, Majido to Berdis Hanna at the south. Their center is located in Ayn al-Mansi to the east of Mishmar Haymk. (28)

According to Bainbridge (29) the Turks are mainly found in the Leticia, Aleppo and Hims provinces. In the Leticia region, they live in the central district and sub-districts and villages of Basit, Bayir Behluliye and Kesab. In the Aleppo region, they live in the central district and in the sub-district and villages of Kurtdagi, Jerablus, Menbej, Musabeyli and Azaz.

Assimilation policies

In the First World War to get the help of Arabs, the coalition powers started to introduce the nationalism ideology in the Arab community against the Turkish identity of the Ottomans. (1) The pan-Arabic mentality grew rapidly. The Arabs started to hold the Turks responsible for the failure of Arabs to catch up with the development, which took place in the world, particularly, in Europe. This led to the development of severe antipathy toward the Turks. Many events have been took place, which amplified this antipathy, particularly in Syria and Iraq:

1. Adoption of a secular system by the Republic of Turkey is considered against the religion by Arabs
2. Establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel.
3. Failure of the Arabs in their conflict with Israel intensified further the pan-Arabic attitudes.
4. Union of Antioch with Turkey.
5. Early appearance of socialism in Syria and later in Iraq, while on the contrary, Turkey leaned toward the capitalist camp.

6. Building a network of dams on the Euphrates in Turkey, led to water problems with Syria.
7. The Israeli-Turkish military agreement in 1996.
8. Passive Turkish policy toward the Turks living in the POEFCs.

Although the Turkish communities of POEFCs tried to become accustomed to the newly found situation and accepted the new countries as homelands without creating any political uprising or disturbing the political quietness, they have remained to be the goal of the assimilation policies. Each of the factors mentioned above increased further the suppression and added an additional burden on the Turks in both Syria and Iraq.

The Anti-Turkish strategy has been established as an official policy of the state in these two countries. The Turks are continuously underestimated. They are included in the Arab Sunni majority in Syria and considered Arabs. They could never register their nationality as Turk in the censuses and the government never recognized their existence in Syria.

The assimilation policy, which, applied to the Turks of Iraq, reached its peak under Saddam's regime, was applied to the Syrian Turks much earlier in the third decade of the last century. They have been deprived of all the national and cultural rights. They have no school to teach their children in their mother language, while other sects have been given rights to have schooling in their language.

"Dogru Yol" newspaper, which was published in 1922, could resist the suppressive policies of the Syrian authorities only for 4 years. Thereafter, Vahdet, Yeni Mecmua and Yeni Gün newspapers were published. In the 4th decade of the 19th century and when the Anti-Turkish policies were intensified due to the union of Antioch with Turkey, publication in Turkish was prohibited. The Turks of Syria were not allowed to publish in their language, listening to the Turkish radio or TV was considered an offence. The frontier with Turkey was strictly controlled and any contact was considered espionage and punished accordingly.

The prevention of introduction of any publication, which is written in Turkish such as newspapers, journals and books, had deprived the Syrian Turks of reading in their mother language. Furthermore, the possession of such publication was considered an offence and considered treason. The cinemas cannot show Turkish films. (30)

In the forties, Turkish regions were exposed to many raids by Arabs. On 21 July 1945, Kebere, the village of Bucag sub-district, was exposed to an incursion. The headman of the village with his 4 children was killed and his house was robbed. Another attack took place in the Salmir village of the Bayir-Bucak district on 29 July 1945, where 5 were killed and 5 injured. (31)

In this way, the Turkish villages in the Leticia province: Kaynarca, Cabitli, Kandilcik, Belveren, Canacik, Karaagil, Gundesli, Kasap, Colturman, and the Turkish villages in the Aleppo province: Zayyatli, Karun, Mahzetli, Yasli, Caralveren, Kurtveren, Medene, Shehyahaya, Camusveren, Dedenoglu, Kurudere and Kirkmagara have been partially evacuated by the Turks and were inhabited by Arabs. (32) As it happened under the Saddam regime in Iraq it happened under the Asad regime in Syria: hundreds of Turkish town names were changed in Arabic names (Table 2).

The communal representation of the Syrian Turkmen in the parliament was deliberately reduced after independence and they were not allowed to be represented in the Syrian parliament in the 1954 election. In 1953 the communal system was completely abolished. Further legislation eliminated their personal status. They are prevented from engaging in military and security sectors. Turks were not given passports. They were banned from being appointed in the governmental offices. It is forbidden to organize a concert for Turkish singers. Establishment of cultural, social or sportive associations was not allowed and their request in 2005 was rejected. Their education status is inferior to the Arabs. The children who did not learn Arabic until the primary school have really difficulty at school. (33, 27)

Table 2, Arabized Names of Turkish populated towns. (35)

Turkish Names	Arabic names
Leticia Region	
Ablakli	Beytiablak
Agcabayir	Al_Beyda
Elmali	Tufahiyya
Gebere	Ravda
Gokdag	Al_Hadra
Isabeyli	Iseviyya
Kebeli	Rabia
Kulcuk	Durra
Saldur	Samire
Seren	Helve
Turuc	Um Mutuyur
Aleppo Region	
Alici	Talatiyya
Arapcorduk	Eyyubiyya
Buzluca	Thelce
Coban Bey	Al_Rai
Devehoyuk	Tel al-Hava
Havahoyuk	Tel al-Hajar
Kalkim	Nazha
Kepveren	Eseriyya
Kocali	Musinne
Mazici	Amiriyya
Sekizler	Muzmine
Sipahiler	Al-Firsan
Taskapi	Babi al-Hajar
Taslihoyuk	Tel al-Jamal
Tastan	Merma al-Hajer

Through the legislation of land reform in 1958 the basically agricultural Turkish community lost the vast majority of their lands, particularly in the Aleppo province, which were transferred later to the Arabs. (33) The restriction of tobacco agriculture harmed the Turks more than the other communities. The Turks were also deprived of the governmental support to the farmers, which constituted an important sum in socialist Syria.

The Turks of Syria gradually started to uncover their nationality to avoid deprivation of their rights as citizens. It is difficult to approximate the size of the Turkish community, which was assimilated in the Syrian Arabic community. Their large number can be inferred from the Turkish family names of thousands of intelligentsia, merchants, officers, and other politicians, for example, Kerkchi, Kashikchi, Turkman, Turkmani, Kuwetli, Bektash and Chichekli. The Kemikchioglulari family belongs to those who could not resist the oppressive assimilation policies and changed their name to Adhem.

The Budak tribes, who are partially assimilated, prefer now to talk Arabic over Turkish. The tribes of Barak Turks are now totally Arabified in the Raqqa region. The suppressive agricultural policy of Syrian governments had forced the predominantly agricultural Turkish community to work in severely hard sectors. (35)

As happened in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, large numbers of Syrian Turks immigrated collectively to Turkey in 1945, 1951, 1953, 1967 apart from those who cross the border illegally and continuously.

After the building of a network of dams on the Euphrates and reaching the Israeli-Turkish military agreement in the 1990s, the political pressure has been intensified on the Turks of Syria, particularly those whose relatives live or study in Turkey. Many Turkish intellectuals were arrested, even those who were members of the ruling Ba'ath party. Twenty active members of the Bayir-bucak Solidarity Association, which is based in Antioch, were arrested. After a bombing attack, the Turks who were detained in the same region numbered about 600. (25).

Conclusion

Due to various factors, as in the Turks in POEFCs, the Syrian Turkmen have been exposed to suppression and assimilation policies. Their cultural and economical status has deteriorated and they have remained an under-privileged population. They have been left alone and are not supported by the international community even by Turkey.

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