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# **Kurds in Northeastern Syria: The Development of Kurdish Culture and Its Practice Through Education**

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Master Middle Eastern Studies

Kurds in Northeastern Syria: The Development of Kurdish Culture and Its Practice Through  
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I would also like to share some more personal insights into why I chose this research topic. On one hand, I feel a deep personal connection to the Kurdish language and culture, akin to the bond between a child and their mother. On the other hand, I am encouraged by the progress of this culture, despite the challenges it has faced. It's inspiring to see the Kurdish culture beginning to thrive and assert itself in the northern regions of Syria where there are significant Kurdish populations.

Before commencing the writing process, it's important to acknowledge the influential factors that have contributed to the openness of Kurdish culture. These factors include the educational, cultural, and media institutions of the Autonomous Administration. Additionally, independent institutions or those affiliated with parties outside the Autonomous Administration, along with the endeavors of independent individuals, have played a significant role. Furthermore, the persistent struggles of the Kurdish people in Syria, which were like embers under the ashes. Drawing from my own experience, I have specifically chosen to explore the role of education and its impact on the revitalization of Kurdish cultural practices. During the era of the Baath regime's rule in Syria, I had the experience of being both a student and a teacher in secondary schools in Kurdish-populated areas. Additionally, I had the opportunity to work as a Kurdish language teacher at the onset of the Syrian revolution, where I established the first Kurdish language institute in my city that is situated in the far north of Syria, near the Turkish border. Tragically, this institute was destroyed by ISIS on July 13 2013, following which I was captured and subsequently released as part of a prisoner exchange deal. This marked the abrupt end of a dream that had barely begun.

In this thesis, I delved into the dynamics that shaped the interaction between Kurdish society and the Education Authority, and examined what influenced the development and practice of Kurdish culture. My goal was to create a foundational piece of work that uncovers the dynamics behind these transformations. However, it's important to note that this work includes the necessary analysis and

critique to comprehend this transformation. Hopefully, this contribution will serve as a starting point for others to further analyze and engage with the evolving educational landscape in Syria.



## Introduction

In March 2011, Syria joined the wave of popular protests that had been sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia the previous December 2010. The protests began in response to graffiti written on walls by young men in the southern Syrian city of Daraa.<sup>1</sup> However, the revolutions that swept across the Arab world did not fulfill the aspirations of most of those who had demanded change in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria.<sup>2</sup> Instead, they ushered in a new era of violent conflict and military repression between the state and Islamic groups that emerged in their wake. In Syria, this conflict escalated into a devastating civil war as protests led to a tear in the delicate fabric of rules between the regime and its citizens, both in terms of explicit and implicit rules that had governed their relationship for decades.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing conflict in Syria persists due to the absence of viable political resolutions, which has resulted in a sense of uncertainty surrounding the future of the nation. In response, international and regional interventions have played a role in the informal partitioning of Syria into three distinct regions. Presently, the regime maintains control over 63.38% of the country's area, while the opposition holds 10.98%. The remaining 25.64% is under the dominion of *Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk* (HSD) "The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)".<sup>4</sup>

This informal partition resulted in the appearance of entities that operated beyond the jurisdiction of the state. Armed factions, diverse governing bodies, and competing philosophies influenced each region, with the spectrum of ideologies ranging from moderate to extremist Islam and secularism. The emerging governing bodies endeavored to enforce their vision and beliefs in line with their aspirations for the nation's future, exerting their influence over all facets of life, including education. The "Interim Transitional Administration" was founded in 2013 in the regions inhabited by the Kurdish population that had been abandoned by the Syrian regime.<sup>5</sup> Over time, it incorporated the territories once held by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and rebranded itself as *Rêveberiya Xweser a Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyeyê* "The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)".<sup>7</sup> These regions are currently overseen by the Syrian Democratic

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<sup>1</sup> David McMurray and Amanda Ufheil-Somers, eds. "[IV. Introduction]." In *The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 157.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen J. King, *The Arab Winter: Democratic Consolidation, Civil War, and Radical Islamists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Carsten Wieland, "Asad's Lost Chances," in *The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East*, ed. David McMurray and Amanda Ufheil-Somers (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 160.

<sup>4</sup> "Map of Military Control Across Syria at the End of 2022 and the Beginning of 2023," *Jusoor*, January 2, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/3tzvwyxr>

<sup>5</sup> "Syrian Kurdish Party Plans Transitional Administration," *BBC News*, 13 November 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts. Volume 2: "Governing Diversity: The Kurds in a New Middle East"* (London; New York City; etc.: I.B. Tauris, 2019): 89.

<sup>7</sup> Erin Banco, "Fight for Kobane may have Created a New Alliance in Syria: Kurds and the Assad Regime," *International Business Times*, October 8, 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/njep66m7>

Forces. Over time, the Autonomous Administration in Qamishli, Kobani, and Afrin assumed responsibility for various facets of daily life and culture, establishing a connection between *Rêveberiya Perwerdehiyê* “Education Authority” and the *Saziya Zimanê Kurdî* (SZK) “Kurdish Language Foundation”. In 2014, the school curriculum underwent a transformation, with the 2015-2016 academic year marking the official start of switching the language of education to the Kurdish language.<sup>8</sup>

### Main Research Question

This study aims to investigate how the Educational Authority affiliated with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria promotes Kurdish language and culture and influences the cultural practices of the broader Kurdish community in *Rojava* “Western Kurdistan.”<sup>9</sup> It seeks to identify the factors and dynamics that have influenced the interaction between the Syrian Kurds and the Education Authority, leading to the development and advancement of Kurdish culture. Specifically, the research will examine the contributions of the Education Authority to the practice of Kurdish culture and identity in *Rojava*, as well as the nature of the interaction between the Educational Authority and the broader Kurdish community in Syria. The goal is to contribute to the existing literature on the effectiveness of the educational system in promoting Kurdish cultural practices and to understand the extent of its interaction with the Kurdish community. Ultimately, this study aims to comprehend the progress made in enhancing Kurdish cultural identity, which has historically faced challenges from successive central regimes.

### Literature Review

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has garnered significant attention in literature due to its departure from traditional governance systems and models, as well as its efforts to combat ISIS. However, I would like to focus solely on the literature surrounding the new educational system in this region and its impact on the communities, particularly the Kurdish population. The literature on education in northeastern Syria post-Syrian conflict ranges from general

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<sup>8</sup> “Kuwnfraāns Ālthaāny Limuw’assa<sup>2</sup> Āllugha<sup>2</sup> Ālkurdiya<sup>2</sup>: Taḥdiyd Nīzaām Ālt’lym fy Muqaṭ’a<sup>2</sup> ‘afriyn,” [The Second Conference of the Kurdish Language Foundation: Defining the Education System in Afrin Canton, translation mine - MM], *Afrin Canton Website*, January 18, 2015, accessed December 9, 2022, <https://goo.gl/m5pfQF>

<sup>9</sup> The Syrian regime gradually withdrew from the Kurdish-populated areas in northern Syria, starting on July 19, 2012 in Kobani, in favor of the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (PYD) “the Democratic Union Party”. Since that date, the Kurdish population areas in northern Syria have been referred to as *Rojava*, meaning “Western Kurdistan.” This naming is part of the designations of the four parts of Kurdistan by the PYD, where the Kurdish population areas in Turkey are known as *Bakûr*, “Northern Kurdistan,” those in Iraq as *Başûr*, “Southern Kurdistan,” and those in Iran as *Rojhilat*, “Eastern Kurdistan.”

discussions on education and the changes taking place to critical inquiries and the Autonomous Administration's ideological visions.

One noteworthy piece of literature examining the state of education after the Syrian conflict is Basileus Zeno's research article titled "Education and Alienation: The Case of Displaced Syrians and Refugees."<sup>10</sup> While Zeno's article provides valuable insights into the impact of the civil war on education, he only briefly explains the differences between various curricula without delving into the significance of recent changes or their effects on societies such as the Kurds. It would be helpful to explore the goals of such radical changes and their importance to these communities.

In Chapter 7 of her book *Statelet of Survivors: The Making of a Semi-Autonomous Region in Northeastern Syria*, Amy Austin Holmes discusses the impact of education on promoting religious and ethnic equality, as well as sexuality. The new educational system enabled Kurds, Armenians, and Syriac Assyrians to learn about their language, history, culture, and music. This resulted in the empowerment of these communities and strengthened their sense of identity, particularly following the repression they experienced under ISIS.<sup>11</sup> I recognize the significance of this thorough and insightful work in exploring the concept of Autonomous Administration. It is worth noting that while the seventh chapter delves into the topic of education, it is just one piece of the larger puzzle that this book seeks to solve. As such, the chapter and the book as a whole do not examine the level of acceptance and engagement the Kurdish community may have had with the curricula presented. This is a complex issue, as embracing a new educational system and integrating it into a community's dynamics can prove challenging.

Due to the significance of education and the impact of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria's establishment of its own governance structures, including the Education Authority, several think tanks have conducted thorough studies on the resulting changes. One such report, entitled "Education in Northeastern Syria... A Crisis Reality and Incomplete Solutions [translation mine - MM]" and authored by the *Mena Research and Study Center*, delves into the transformation of the educational system and its potential connection to the promotion of *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK) "Kurdistan Workers' Party" ideologies in Syria.<sup>12</sup> Also Ghadi Sary's research paper, "Kurdish Self-Governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition," discussed the potential for one party to shape the educational system based on their own agenda instead of taking a broader,

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<sup>10</sup> Basileus Zeno, "Education and Alienation: the Case of Displaced Syrians and Refugees," *Digest of Middle East Studies*(4), 30 (2021): 287. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12251>

<sup>11</sup> Amy Austin Holmes, *Statelet of Survivors: The Making of a Semi-Autonomous Region in Northeast Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 157.

<sup>12</sup> "Ālt'lym fy Shamaāl Sharq Sūuriyā .. Wāqi' Mut'āz Waḥluluwul Qaāširaa<sup>2</sup>," [Education in Northeastern Syria...a Crisis Reality and Incomplete Solutions, translation mine - MM], *Mena Research and Study Center*, November 30, 2020.<https://tinyurl.com/4a28bw3u>

inclusive perspective.<sup>13</sup> While I understand the significance of this work and the consequential concerns among the Arab population, it failed to address the changes happening within the Kurdish community. Specifically, the paper neglected to explore the ways in which heterogeneous Kurdish culture could be strengthened and their awareness of their heritage and history in the region developed.

Certain literature has addressed concerns pertaining to the development of the region's educational system. These concerns consist of potential repercussions such as failure to acknowledge these educational institutions in the future, and the apprehension surrounding the inability to access the job market on equal footing with all communities in the region, including Kurds, Arabs, and religious minorities. Hiba Abou Khashabha's master's thesis, *“A Comparative Study: The Impact of War on Education in Syria under Different Parties, Ideologies, and Educational Systems,”* examined the educational situation in three regions - opposition, regime, and Autonomous Administration areas. The research emphasized the residents' worries about the lack of recognition of these approaches beyond the region. As the curriculum is taught in Kurdish, it restricts job opportunities to Kurdish areas exclusively.<sup>14</sup> This study holds significant value as it pertains to the interaction between the Kurdish population and educational institutions. However, it lacks specificity and detail regarding the factors of this interaction. Additionally, it fails to address the underlying reasons that motivate individuals to engage with the Education Authority in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The issue of the lack of recognition of these school curricula outside the Autonomous Administration areas is indeed a serious concern. However, this matter falls outside the scope of this thesis. It has been extensively covered in previous literature, and this thesis will primarily focus on the Kurdish population's practice of their culture and language.

Further comparative studies were conducted, including an examination of the curricula of neighboring countries, as highlighted in Pinar Dinc's research titled *“The Content of School Textbooks in (Nation) States and 'Stateless Autonomies': A Comparison of Turkey and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava).”* Through this analysis of school curricula, notable differences in nation-building discourses and national identities between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and Turkey were revealed.<sup>15</sup> This analysis illuminates the distinctive educational programs and beliefs present in the area. Moreover, it

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<sup>13</sup> Ghadi Sary, “Kurdish Self-Governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition,” *Middle East and North Africa Programme* (September 15, 2016): 13.

<sup>14</sup> Hiba Abou Khashabha, *“A Comparison Study: Different Parties, Different Ideologies, Different Educational Systems: The War and Its Effects on Schooling in Syria”* (Master diss., Central European university, 2021), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Pinar Dinc, “The Content of School Textbooks in (Nation) States and 'Stateless Autonomies': a Comparison of Turkey and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava),” *Nations and Nationalism*(4), 26 (2020): 994-1014. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12608>

highlights the correlation between the content and political associations of school textbooks through a comparative analysis of primary school course materials in Turkey and *Rojava*. I consider this study to be of great significance, particularly as it exhibits how the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has endeavored to construct a governing framework by disseminating its principles through education. My research investigates how these policies, which aim to fortify and enable the Kurdish population in Syria, have influenced the way in which the Kurds engage with the education system and, consequently, cultivate their identity and heritage.

As part of an examination of curricula, Ibrahim Khalil conducted research on the language and content, which was detailed in his article titled “Kurdish Education Curricula in Autonomous Administration [translation mine - MM].” Khalil's study focused on analyzing the books' content and grammatical errors, taking into account the experience of the curricula in the Kurdish language and the likelihood of such errors.<sup>16</sup> While Khalil's research contributes to the development of Kurdish-language curricula, it does not explore how these efforts impact the promotion of Kurdish culture or address societal changes currently underway.

Several studies have delved into the competitive dynamics of education in the country. Salwa Al-Ahmad's article, “Education - an Arena of Political Contestation: the Case of Qamishli City in North-Eastern Syria,” sheds light on the rivalry between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime employs its international recognition to attract students and exert legitimacy in the city, while the Autonomous Administration likewise utilizes education as a tool to compete and regulate the local population<sup>17</sup> by empowering marginalized groups like the Kurds and the Yazidis through its updated school curricula. This contestation played a significant role in the development of the educational institution's curricula. The contestation extended beyond the Syrian regime to include other influential Kurdish organizations. This contestation impacted various aspects of Kurdish culture, such as cinema, theatre, publishing, and media, not just the educational sector. In my research, I dedicated a chapter 3 to examining the influence of these Kurdish organizations, independent of Autonomous Administration, along with other in-depth chapters covering various factors.

Finally, although these reviews do not represent the entirety of literature on the new educational system in northeastern Syria, Elise Boyle Espinosa and Adam Ronan's article, “Rojava's 'War of Education': The Role of Education in Building a Revolutionary Political Community in North and East Syria,” offers a perspective that aligns with the Autonomous Administration of North

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<sup>16</sup> Ibrahim Khalil, “Manahij Ālta'lym Ālkurdiyaa<sup>2</sup> fy Ālāidāra<sup>2</sup> Āldhātiya<sup>2</sup>,” [Kurdish Education Curricula in Autonomous Administration, translation mine - MM], *Medarat Kurd*, December 8, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Salwa Al-Ahmad, “Education—an Arena of Political Contestation: the Case of Qamishli City in North-Eastern Syria,” *European University Institute* (2023): 13-14.

and East Syria (AANES). Autonomous Administration's project advocates for a diverse political society founded on principles of radical democracy, women's liberation, and environmentalism. Their research illustrates how the educational system in *Rojava* challenges the cooperative framework of capitalism and patriarchy by prioritizing a return to egalitarian values and exposing the divisions and issues caused by the capitalist nation-state system.<sup>18</sup> This article provides valuable insights into the theoretical and revolutionary principles of the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD)* “the Democratic Union Party” and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). However, it is important to note that the challenge to capitalism posed by the Autonomous Administration did not significantly impact people's engagement with the education system. Instead, I aim to address gaps in existing research by exploring the intricate dynamics that influenced the Kurds' interactions with the education system under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. By understanding these factors, insight into the evolution of Kurdish cultural and identity practices can be gained.

### Thesis Statement

This thesis examines the notable changes in the practice of Kurdish language and culture by Kurds in Syria within the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) areas before and after the Syrian Civil War. The Kurds have embraced the new system in which they were raised, fostering a stronger sense of cultural and national identity and expressing it more effectively. The realization of this effective expression was facilitated by improving individuals' ability to learn, work, and engage in cultural practices in the Kurdish language. Such active and public engagement is unparalleled in modern Syrian history. The interactive relationship between the Education Authority of the Autonomous Administration and the broader Kurdish community has played a crucial role in shaping and perpetuating Kurdish culture and traditions. This research provides insights into the role of Educational Authority and delves into the dynamic interactions that occur between these institutions and the wider Kurdish society.

### Theoretical Framework and Methodology

My thesis will utilize the constructivist approach as a theoretical framework to elucidate the process by which social interaction shapes racial identity. This encompasses the role of local individuals as part of a specific ethnic group, as well as the impact of cultural and educational

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<sup>18</sup> Elise Boyle Espinosa and Adam Ronan, “Rojava’s ‘War of Education’: The Role of Education in Building a Revolutionary Political Community in North and East Syria,” *Third World Quarterly* 44 (10) (September 9, 2022): 2289-90.

systems in generating ethnic distinctions and conditioning individuals to view members of other groups as adversaries. My goal is to delve into the intricate cultural realm in which these groups coexist and navigate their contrasting opinions and disparities. This is vital to understanding the negotiations and interactions between the Autonomous Administration and the local Kurdish populace, with the aim of empowering Kurdish population that have experienced marginalization and coerced assimilation into centralized structures by strengthening the Education Authority.

Regarding the methodologies employed, I conducted an evaluation of the level of Kurdish national and cultural awareness through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. To conduct the qualitative research, I referenced a diverse range of literature, including published articles, books, journals, recent press, field studies, and research examining textbooks and social media content. The literature was sourced in Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish, and English. For my quantitative research study, I collected a broad range of data from various sources, including the Education Authority and the Kurdish Language Foundation (SZK). Specifically, I have got figures on the number of students enrolled in schools, and the number of schools and teachers. To ensure the utmost accuracy and gain deeper insights, I conducted insightful interviews with officials from both institutions. Due to the unavailability of comparative data, such as the number of students in Kurdish cities prior to 2011, and the number of students not registered with the Education Authority of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Furthermore, conducting a field study in Syria is not feasible due to personal safety concerns. Instead, I have interviewed a diverse range of individuals within the Kurdish community to assess the effectiveness of the Education Authority in nurturing Kurdish culture and its implementation, and to gauge community perspectives. This includes individuals such as writers, directors, publishers, linguists, and key stakeholders in the education process, such as teachers and students.

### **Thesis Content**

In this thesis in chapter 1, I will delve into the development of the Kurdish cultural identity in Syria's modern history, exploring how the Kurdish people were integrated into central regimes and how they navigated these challenges. Chapter 2 will focus on the impact of the PKK's activity on the formation of Kurdish national consciousness and its role in promoting Kurdish culture. Additionally, it will examine the autonomous administration of northeastern Syria and the Kurdish community's interaction with the educational institution. Chapter 3 deals with additional influential Kurdish organizations and their role in promoting Kurdish culture. Chapters 4 through 6 will explore the dynamics that affected people's interaction with the new educational system, including involvement, Vacuum, and adaptation. The thesis will conclude with a condensed summary of the research.



## Chapter 1: History of the Development of the Practice of Kurdish Cultural and Identity

Instead of offering a mere glimpse into the development of the Kurdish political movement in Syria, I aim to present a summary examination of the evolution of Syrian Kurds' practicing of their identity and culture. While the practices are closely tied to the growth of the Kurdish political movement, they are not the sole influencer of the dynamics of Kurdish identity and culture. Within this chapter, my argument centers upon the intergenerational transmission of cultural practices in regional Kurdish society. Specifically, I examine how individuals maintain their cultural identity through everyday socialization, family systems, and other social organizations. These factors have both systematically and unsystematically impacted and interacted with the internal dynamics and external influences of the Kurdish society.

When referring to internal dynamics, I am specifically referring to the factors within Syria. On one hand, the Syrian Kurds have engaged with the Syrian Kurdish political movement, including its growth and fragmentation. The Kurdish political endeavors vary from seeking autonomy to advocating for unity and cultural rights within current boundaries, illustrating the diverse nature of Kurdish aspirations.<sup>19</sup> Add to that, the actions of social actors, such as musicians, writers, poets, and journalists, had a significant impact on the people they interacted with. In the Kurdish regions, the preservation and practice of Kurdish culture were closely tied to the cultural and literary traditions of the Kurdish people, particularly their oral literature. This emphasized the intricate relationship between art, literature, and a collective sense of national identity. On the other hand, the internal dynamics were also influenced by authoritarian structures and the efforts of successive Arab regimes in Syria to assimilate the Kurds into a central Arab identity.

Regarding external factors, the Kurds were impacted in two ways. Firstly, they affected with the Kurdish revolutions in nearby nations such as Iraq like *Şoreşa Eylûlê* “the September Revolution” (1961-1970)<sup>20</sup> and Turkey like Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>21</sup> These revolutions were instrumental in molding the Kurdish national consciousness and aspirations in Syria, which, in turn, influenced how people embraced and expressed their cultural identity. Secondly, as nation-states emerged in the region, the development of Kurdish nationalism across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria was intertwined with the nation-building policies of these countries. This came at the cost of Kurdish national aspirations, resulting in rebellions against both physical and cultural oppression.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Umut Erel and Necla Acik, “Enacting Intersectional Multilayered Citizenship: Kurdish Women’s Politics,” *Gender, Place & Culture*(4), 27 (2019): 481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2019.1596883>

<sup>20</sup> Shafan Ibrahim, “Āl’alaqa<sup>2</sup> byn Īqlym Kurdistan w Kurd Suwriyā .. Āljdh̄r Āltaārykhy,” [The Relationship Between the Kurdistan Region and the Kurds of Syria...the Historical Root, translation mine - MM], *Syria TV*, August 9, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Rena Netjes and Erwin van Veen, “Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist: The YPG/PYD During the Syrian Conflict,” *CRU Report*, April 2021, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism versus Nation-Building States* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2000), 44.

This chapter is of utmost importance as it serves as the foundation for this thesis. The significance of this chapter lies in the fact that it will be used as a reference point to monitor the development process taking place in light of the new educational landscape, in the subsequent chapters. Hence, comprehending the origin and evolution of Kurdish national consciousness, the development and crystallization of its identity, as well as the obstacles it faced, is crucial in understanding the ongoing development. It is important to note that Kurdish national consciousness and cultural practices already existed and developed over time, due to internal and external factors, before the emergence of the Autonomous Administration and the development of its cultural and educational institutions. The practice of Kurdish culture was made possible by the collective efforts of the resistance movement, and its development in interaction with authoritarian structures. This community output, even if small, was a testament to the resilience of the Kurdish people and was difficult for central regimes to completely eradicate. The Kurdish cultural values that emerged during Syria's modern history are regarded as enduring and non-negotiable due to the Kurds' steadfast dedication to their heritage. These values are fundamental dimensions of the changes experienced by the Kurdish population in Syria following the Syrian conflict since 2011, including the implementation of a new educational system.

### **French Mandate Era (1920-1946)**

In the time of the Syrian French Mandate, a clear cultural distinction existed among the Kurdish communities inhabiting the urban and rural regions. More particularly, the rural Kurdish populace was segregated into two explicit categories: a group on the fringes including peasants and underprivileged individuals, and a second group consisting of feudal lords and aghas with substantial financial and tribal sway. The French administration made efforts to accommodate the latter group by granting them permission to partake in diverse political, social, and other events. At the same time, Kurdish activists and leaders transitioned from the Turkish independence courts to the northern regions of Syria, seeking refuge and political asylum.<sup>23</sup> The French Mandate officials granted them a monthly stipend which greatly impacted the development of the Kurdish culture and identity. The French authorities played a crucial role in enabling the political and artistic activities of Kurdish leaders. This allowed them to freely move around in Kurdish villages and spread nationalist ideology among the peasants. However, the authorities suppressed nationalist sentiment among the rural Kurdish population.<sup>24</sup> A peasant once expressed to *Nûredîn Zaza* “A Kurdish academic and

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<sup>23</sup> Anne Sofie Schøtt, *Kurdish Diaspora Mobilisation in Denmark: Supporting the Struggle in Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 62-63.

<sup>24</sup> Schøtt, *Kurdish Diaspora*, 65.

politician, and founder of the first Kurdish party in Syria”, “You're from the urban areas where nobody can touch you. We, on the other hand, are peasants. If we express our Kurdish nationalist sentiments, we will immediately face police harassment.”<sup>25</sup>

Upon revisiting Nûredîn Zaza's memoirs, it is apparent that the peasant class in Syria faced marginalization from both the mandate authorities and the feudal class. Despite this, they sought to establish a Kurdish national and cultural identity through their interactions with Kurdish individuals coming from Turkey. One particular farmer's expression of his Kurdish nationalist beliefs demonstrated that his nationalistic sentiments had begun to develop and were a natural extension of his Kurdish identity and culture. This was influenced by external factors, such as Kurdish activists fleeing the Turkish independence courts, as well as his understanding of the ruling structure and policies of the new French mandate. A clear example of the attempt to encourage Kurdish national consciousness can be seen in the 1930s, when Mustafa Al-Bouti, a young Kurd from the peasant class in *Ain Diwar* “a town with a Kurdish population in the far north-east of Syria at the meeting of the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi border”, applied to open a Kurdish-language school. The French Legation in Beirut denied his application.<sup>26</sup> The occurrences mentioned indicate the widespread presence of Kurdish national consciousness in rural areas, evolving into a grassroots movement. This movement encompasses a fervent aspiration for progress and practice, reflecting the growing influence of Kurdish cultural values and recognition of cultural rights and education in the Kurdish language. Additionally, it exemplifies the burgeoning popular demands of the Kurdish community for education in their own language.

The upsurge of nationalist sentiment among Syrian Kurds was driven by two key factors, one of which was the establishment of the *Xoybûn* “Independence” Organization in 1927. This organization, which advocated for Kurdish independence, was headquartered in Beirut and had branches in Aleppo, Damascus, Al-Hasakah, as well as in Turkey, Iraq, Paris, London, and Detroit.<sup>27</sup> Its formation was an offshoot of the movement of Kurdish immigrants from Turkey who migrated to Syria after 1925, and its growth was closely intertwined with the considerable expansion of state nationalism in Turkey during the 1920s. It's worth noting that the founders of the *Xoybûn* organization included Celadet, Kamîran, and Sûreya Bedirxan, who were descendants of Bedirxan Bey, the last prince of the Kurdish Emirate of Botan. Bedirxan Bey led a rebellion against the Ottoman government in the first half of the 19th century, and according to nationalist legends, he is

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<sup>25</sup> Nûredîn Zaza, *hyāty Ālkurdiya*<sup>2</sup>, [My Kurdish Life, translation mine - MM], trans. Rony Mohammad Domly (Erbil: Aras, 2011), 67.

<sup>26</sup> Zaza, *hyāty Ālkurdiya*<sup>2</sup>, 60.

<sup>27</sup> In Turkey, *Xoybûn* was active in Mardin, Diyarbakir, Şırnak, and Siirt, and in Iraq, the main center of the organization was in Baghdad. It also appears that *Xoybûn* was very active in the Kurdish region, especially in Kirkuk, Sulaymaniya, Zakho, and Rawanduz.

considered the progenitor of Kurdish nationalism. Bedirxan Bey's progeny were educated in Ottoman Turkey, where they became involved in the development of the Kurdish nationalist movement under the influence of their father, Prince Elî Bedirxan, who was one of the supporters of the *Kürt Te'avün ve Terakki Cemiyeti* "Kurdish Society for Mutual Aid and Progress", the first national association founded in Istanbul in 1908.<sup>28</sup>

*Xoybûn* played a crucial role in the development of nationalist discourse and practice in Kurdistan, serving as the umbrella organization for Kurdish political life in Syria. While the movement had a strong ideological component, its primary objective was to promote national consciousness among the tribes. This was based on the leadership's conviction that national education was necessary for the tribal community in Kurdistan. The nationalist ideas propagated by *Xoybûn* were heavily influenced by Western liberal thought, reflecting the aspirations of Kurdish intellectuals. However, these concepts were not popular amongst the tribesmen, as their interests were primarily limited to their tribes, villages, and tribal areas. As a result, the *Xoybûn* nationalist message remained mostly local and had to be adapted to meet the interests of tribesmen and chieftains. Until 1927, Kurdish nationalists were successful in appealing to local constituencies, but failed to mobilize tribes with wider political influence. The new "guerrilla" ideology supported by *Xoybûn*, perhaps inspired by independence movements in Latin America, proved instrumental in bringing the Kurds into the realm of modern nationalist mobilization.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the Mandate period, Kurdish culture and identity underwent a transformation due to the second trend which was an extension of *Xoybûn* activity. This phase was a significant stage in the Kurdish cultural renaissance, which was promoted by Celadet Bedirxan and Kamîran through the *Hawar* magazine titled "Scream". From 1932 to 1935, this magazine, based in Damascus, aimed to revive Kurdish popular literature, produce educational materials in Kurdish, and provide a platform for discussions on various topics including Kurdish linguistics, grammar, and dialects as well as cultural and social issues. It is important to note that this transformation was a result of the cultural movement during the French mandate in different areas such as education, newspapers, magazines, cinema, and theater throughout Syria.<sup>30</sup> However, due to government regulations, Kurds faced

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<sup>28</sup> Barbara Henning, "Narratives of the History of the Ottoman Kurdish Bedirhani Family in Imperial and Post-Imperial Contexts: Continuities and Changes" (PhD diss., University of Bamberg Press, 2018), 76.

<sup>29</sup> Abdul Sattar Taher Sharif, *Âljam 'yât Walmunaẓmat Âlkurdiya fy Nusuf Qarn* [Kurdish Associations and Organizations in Half a Century, translation mine - MM], (Baghdad: Al-Ma'rifa Company, 1979), 72.

<sup>30</sup> Muhammad Yahya Ahmed Abbas and Bariq Abbas Obaid Abbas, "Âlḥayaa² Âlthaqafiya² fy Suriya (1920 \_ 1946m)," [Cultural Life in Syria (1920-1946 AD)], *Al-Anbar University Journal for Humanities*, (2015): 377-405. <https://doi.org/10.37653/juah.2015.144743>

restrictions on learning their mother tongue, which prevented them from receiving education in Kurdish or establishing Kurdish language schools.<sup>31</sup>

The resurgence of Kurdish cultural identity in Syria was a direct result of the Kurdish cultural renaissance that occurred in the Soviet Union and Iraq after World War I.<sup>32</sup> The failure of the Kurdish *Serhildanên Agiriyê* “Ararat rebellion” (1930) prompted many active nationalists to abandon military solutions in favor of cultural activism. The Kurdish cultural renaissance in Syria has contributed to a clearer manifestation of Kurdish identity. This resurgence has occurred in three distinct geographical areas, indicating the cross-border influence on the development of Kurdish cultural identity within Syria's Kurdish regions. This movement also facilitated a dialogue between the different strata of Kurdish society in Syria, including the intellectual classes (notables, intellectuals, and professionals) and the urban tribal elites. In 1933, Haço Agha's article “The Sheikh, the Agha, and the Intellectuals” resolved the debate surrounding this issue, which was pivotal in promoting the teaching of Kurdish language education among some tribal leaders.<sup>33</sup>

In examining the rapid evolution of Kurdish identity and culture in Syria during the Mandate era, we observe a shift in Kurdish national consciousness from urban areas to the countryside. This transformation was propelled by the efforts of *Xoybûn* and Kurdish nationalists fleeing the Turkish independence courts, leading nationalist endeavors to transition into collective societal efforts outside the confines of tribal alliances. These changes were deeply intertwined with historical events and significantly influence behavioral and cognitive patterns. Essentially, the formation of cultural identity has become more subjective and defined, representing a deeply ingrained belief within Kurdish society's collective consciousness. It served as the primary lens through which reality is perceived and is considered unalterable, particularly as there has been a transition from relying on military solutions to emphasizing Kurdish cultural activities. This shift is evident in *Hawar* magazine's initiatives aimed at revitalizing Kurdish literature and educational materials in the Kurdish language. Despite the absence of opportunities to establish Kurdish schools during the Mandate period, the Kurdish language continued to serve as a crucial indicator of Kurdish cultural values.<sup>34</sup> This evolution in Kurdish national and cultural awareness ultimately led to a growing demand for education in the Kurdish language, which later became a significant aspect of Kurdish political movements and parties.

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<sup>31</sup> Özkan Gökcan, “The Historical Process of Syria's Kurdish Issue (1946-2011),” *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi*(2), 5 (2018): 160. <https://doi.org/10.26513/tocd.425958>

<sup>32</sup> Jordi Tejel Gorgas, “The Kurdish Cultural Movement in Mandatory Syria and Lebanon: An Unfinished Project of ‘National Renaissance,’ 1932–46,” *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 5 (2014): 848. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483005>.

<sup>33</sup> Haço Agha Hevîrkan, “Sheikh Agha and Intellectuals,” *Hawar*, no. 15, 1933, 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> *Modern Orient*, No. 18, 1938, 121.

### From Independence 1946 until 1963

Following independence, Syrian government authorities turned down the Kurdish demands for autonomy, resulting in a complex relationship characterized by periods of repression and manipulation of citizenship. In spite of the rejection, the Kurds agreed to Syrian citizenship.<sup>35</sup> However, the concept of citizenship continued to be associated with Arabist stereotypes. This was evident in the failure to acknowledge the Kurds as a people sharing the same geographic space, as well as in the phenomenon of individuals being stripped of their citizenship and the resulting social hierarchy that emerged. This was exemplified in the early 1960s, when the citizenship of thousands of Kurds who could not provide evidence of Syrian residency prior to 1945 was revoked.<sup>36</sup> The post-independence governments, driven by the bolstering of Arab-centric identity, hindered the establishment of schools that taught in Kurdish and even sought to close all Kurdish and non-Kurdish associations and clubs created during the French Mandate.

In Prime Minister Saadallah Al-Jabiri's government (April 26, 1946 - December 27, 1946), Interior Minister Sabri Al-Asali (April 27, 1946 - December 27, 1946) made a decision to dissolve any political parties, organizations, or bodies that lacked an official license from the government. This decision had far-reaching consequences, leading to the emergence of a new era of secret Kurdish resistance that operated outside of the public sphere. The "Secret Cultural Society" was established in Aleppo in 1951,<sup>37</sup> followed by the "Kurdish Democratic Youth Unity Association" in Qamishli in 1953, and the "Society for the Revival of Kurdish Culture" in Damascus in 1955.<sup>38</sup> These groups pursued ambitious goals of liberating and unifying Kurdistan, promoting Kurdish language and culture through the establishment of clubs. It is evident that these efforts were an outgrowth of the *Xoybûn* and *Hawar* Association's earlier work.

In 1957, a significant milestone was achieved when the first political party representing the Kurdish population in Syria was established. The primary objective of the party was to safeguard the national and cultural identity of the Kurdish population. Its principal demands encompassed cultural rights and the provision of education in the Kurdish language, alongside pursuing their national emancipation within the context of the Syrian state. The *Partiya Demokrat a Kurd* "Kurdish

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<sup>35</sup> Fatih Oğuzhan İpek, "How to Survive as an Armed Non-State Actor? An Assessment of the Syrian Democratic Union Party," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*(3), 9 (2022): 346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989221100042>

<sup>36</sup> Dilar Dirik, "Stateless Citizenship: 'Radical Democracy as Consciousness-Raising' in the Rojava Revolution," *Identities*(1), 29 (2021): 34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289x.2021.1970978>

<sup>37</sup> Shiar Khalil, "Ālhaka<sup>2</sup> Ālkurdiya<sup>2</sup> fy Suwriya We' zmaāt Ālthiqa<sup>2</sup> m' Āltaraf Ālakhar," [The Kurdish Movement in Syria and Crises of Confidence with the Other Party, translation mine - MM], *Arab Progress Center for Policy*, (April 5, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Shams Al-Din Kilani, "Ālmas'la<sup>2</sup> Ālkurdiya fy qaw' Tehawl Atijāhāt Ālnwkhaw Wal' h'zab Ālkurdiya<sup>2</sup>," [The Kurdish Question in Light of the Shifting Attitudes of Syrian Kurdish Elites and Parties, translation mine - MM], *Arab Center for Research and Political Studies*, (August 30, 2016).

Democratic Party”<sup>39</sup> came into existence in Aleppo, founded by a group of Kurdish intellectuals and notables, led by Dr. Nûredîn Zaza. The party garnered widespread support, including from students in Damascus, war veterans, mullahs, feudal lords, and peasants in the Kurdish regions of Syria. The emergence of the first Kurdish political party represents the culmination of efforts to promote national awareness, which had been taking shape and expanding in rural areas. This transition to organized political resistance follows the development of Kurdish cultural practice, driven by the earlier initiatives of *Xoybûn* and *Hawar*.

The year 1958 saw the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR), an union between Egypt and Syria. However, this union was conditional on the dissolution of all political parties in Syria. President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1958 - 1961), the leader behind this pact, was committed to strengthening the Arab identity and opposed democratic governance, which led to the continued marginalization of the Kurdish community. As a result, the political party's leadership, including Nûredîn Zaza, the head of the party, and Osman Sabri, a member of the party's political bureau, were arrested in a widespread campaign in 1960.<sup>40</sup>

Following the dissolution of the UAR, the Kurds seized an opportunity to form a 27-member delegation from various regions in Syria. The purpose of this delegation was to offer congratulations to Prime Minister Maamun Al-Kuzbari (29 September 1961 – 20 November 1961) and show support for the new phase. Hassan Haco led the delegation, which included esteemed members such as Dr. Nûredîn Zaza and Abdelhamid Darwish. During their visit, the delegation emphasized the importance of consolidating democratic life in the country and holding fair elections as soon as possible.<sup>41</sup> However, the country's new constitution, announced on November 15, 1961, did not reference the Kurds as a second nationality in Syria. The separatist rulers proceeded to hold parliamentary elections on December 1, 1961, which were marked by unfairness, particularly in the Kurdish regions. The official name of the state was amended to include an “Arabic” word, resulting in the state becoming the “Syrian Arab Republic”. Prior to the United Arab Republic (UAR), it was known as the “Republic of Syria”. Despite the obstacles, there was an unprecedented and massive

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<sup>39</sup> There is a discrepancy regarding the name of the first party that was established, as highlighted in the works of two prominent authors. Muhammad Mulla Ahmed's book *Pages from the History of Kurdish National Liberation in Syria*, translation mine - MM suggests that the name of the party is the “Kurdistan Democratic Party”, akin to the Kurdistan Democratic Party in both Iranian Kurdistan and Iraqi Kurdistan. However, according to Nûredin Zaza's memoirs, the name is “Kurdish Democratic Party”, and it is possible that the former name is more accurate. Subsequently, the party in question adopted the name “Kurdish”, instead of “Kurdistan”, upon modifying its objectives from liberating and unifying Kurdistan to securing political, cultural, and administrative rights.

<sup>40</sup> Muhammad Mulla Ahmed, *şafaḥāt min Tārykh ḥaraka² Ālthrw Ālwtny Ālkurdiya²* [Pages from the History of the National Liberation Movement, translation mine - MM]. (Erbil, 2001).

<sup>41</sup> Ismail Muhammad Hassaf, *Tārykh Kurdistan Suwriyā: 1916- 1946* [The History of Syrian Kurdistan: 1916-1946, translation mine - MM] Part 3 (Erbil: Saladin Press, 2017), 270.

turnout to vote for the candidates. The separatist authorities and the *Hajana* “Border Guards” forces in Badia blatantly intervened, falsified the election results, and arrested dozens of the candidates' agents, including the candidates themselves.<sup>42</sup> The formation of a Kurdish delegation to take advantage of Syria's secession from Egypt and support the establishment of democracy, along with the significant Kurdish participation in the subsequent elections, demonstrates the readiness of the Kurdish populace to embrace any forthcoming changes aimed at strengthening democracy in Syria and addressing Kurdish aspirations. These developments reflect the natural progression of Kurdish cultural and political awareness, which has been fostered by the evolution of the Kurdish political movement, including the establishment of the first Kurdish political party.

I posit that the rise of new dynamics led to a new form of clandestine resistance, marked by the establishment of clubs, associations, and political parties. Despite a significant degree of repression leading to a decline in open expression of Kurdish culture, the Kurdish people have persisted in pursuing their legitimate demands, resulting in the gradual formation of the Kurdish political movement. This movement has been shaped by historical events, regional influences, and internal conflicts. Accordingly, the Kurdish political parties were coined as demand parties, focusing on advocating for the cultural rights and education in Kurdish language for the Kurdish population, as well as considering the economic well-being of Kurdish population areas, without calling for a change in the regime. With growing popular support and engagement with emerging cultural elites, sizable segments of the Kurdish populace aligned themselves with the Kurdish partisan political movement.<sup>43</sup> As the Kurdish parties movement developed, the Kurds became willing to embrace any change that could elevate the status of the Kurds and their culture in Syria. This became evident in the formation of a delegation following Syria's separation from Egypt and the significant participation in the elections. However, the high levels of repression prevented the Kurds from realizing their aspirations.

### **The Era of Baath Rule 1963-2011**

After the Baath Party assumed power, they implemented arbitrary measures against the Kurdish population of Syria with the explicit goal of assimilating them into the Arab nation and erasing their national identity. These measures included, among others, maintaining the unfair population census conducted under Syrian President Nazim Al-Qudsi (1961-1963), which took place

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<sup>42</sup> Abdelhamid Darwish, *‘dwa’ ‘lā Ālhrka’ Ālkurdiya’ fī Suwriya: ‘hdath Fatra’ 1956 - 1983* [Spotlight on the Kurdish Movement in Syria: Events of the Period 1956-1983, translation mine - MM] ([s.n.], 2000), 59.

<sup>43</sup> Ali Saleh Al-Mirani, “Ālḥzb Āldiymuqraty Ālkurdi fy Suriya (Ālparty) .. Mīn Te’sys ilā Ālthawra’,” [the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Party)... from its Founding to the Revolution, translation mine - MM], *Medarat Kurd*, March 28, 2016.

on May 10, 1962, the relaunch of the Arab Belt Program in 1974,<sup>44</sup> and issuing Decree No. /49/ of 2008, also known as the Confiscation Law, which concerned real estate.<sup>45</sup> These measures had a profound and far-reaching impact on the Kurdish people, and the number of pressures imposed on them was incalculable.

The Baath Party strategically implemented its doctrines by leveraging the political system to promote its ideals and the concept of Arabism within the educational and cultural landscape. By integrating its beliefs into the educational system,<sup>46</sup> the party disseminated its philosophy and played a significant role in shaping people's beliefs, behaviors, and identities in alignment with its vision of Arabism. This initiative also sought to impart specialized skills and knowledge that align with its political agenda. As part of a broader strategy of demographic manipulation and assimilation, Arab regimes implemented Arabic language curricula in the Kurdish region of Syria. The intent of this policy is to prevent Kurds from gaining knowledge of their own language or establishing educational institutions to teach in Kurdish, as part of the regime's de-ethnicization program.<sup>47</sup> The policy's implementation involved changing the names of schools, streets, and public places into Arabic, deploying armed Arab tribes in Kurdish villages, and using terror to expel civilians from their homes.<sup>48</sup> The Kurdish people faced policies that aimed to Arabize the region and suppress their unique cultural heritage. The ultimate objective was to eradicate Kurdish identity and culture in Syria as part of a larger Arab nationalist movement that sought to unify the population under an Arab identity.<sup>49</sup> This strategy caused the marginalization and suppression of Kurdish identity, language, and history within the education system,<sup>50</sup> with the purpose of assimilating them into the Arab nationalist ideology.<sup>51</sup>

I contend that the implementation of an education system imbued with Baathist pan-Arab principles had a more detrimental impact on Kurdish identity than secret prisons, disappearances,

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<sup>44</sup> Omar Rasoul, "Ālwujwd Ālkurdy fi Suwriyā bayna ḥqa'iq Ālwaqi' Wazayf Āl'ydywlyjyā - 's'lā² min Nār W'jwiba² min Rmād," [The Kurdish Presence in Syria Between the Facts of Reality and the Falsity of Ideology - Questions from Fire and Answers from Ashes, translation mine - MM], *Medarat Kurd*, September 10, 2016. <https://www.medaratkurd.com/2016/09/10/1718/>

<sup>45</sup> "Ālkurd Wāsyasa² Āltankyl Walmjāzr Ālmustahdfa² Wjwdahum Thqāfyan Wajdsdiyan," [The Kurds and the Policy of Abuse and Massacres Targeting their Cultural and Physical Presence, translation mine - MM], *Al-Furat Center for Studies*, January 6, (2020): 1577. <https://firatn.com/?p=1577>

<sup>46</sup> Samira Mobaied, "The Baath-Assadist System, a System of Political Instrumentalisation," *Open Journal of Political Science* (01), 10 (2020): 127. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2020.101009> p.127.

<sup>47</sup> Amir Hassanpour, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Michael Chyet, "The Non-Education of Kurds: A Kurdish Perspective," *International Review of Education*, Special issue, 'The Education of Minorities', eds. *Normand Labrie and Stacy Churchill*, (1996): 368.

<sup>48</sup> Radwan Ziadeh, "The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?," *United States Institute of Peace*, (April, 2009): 2.

<sup>49</sup> Canan Coskan and Ercan Şen, "Counternarratives of Power in Kurds," *PsyArXiv*, (December. 2022): 67.

<sup>50</sup> Hassanpour, Kangas, and Chyet, "The Non-Education," 367-379.

<sup>51</sup> Mobaied, "The Baath-Assadist."

and other forms of state violence. The Kurds had already been assimilated into Arab nationalism during the previous governments before the Baath government came into power. The principles of the Baath Party further compounded the burden on the Kurds, leading to increased cultural deprivation and persecution. The Arab regimes in Syria utilized educational institutions, particularly in Kurdish areas, to effectively mold attitudes and behaviors, shape societal norms and values, and exert control over cultural production. This is exemplified by the Kurdish community's struggle with illiteracy in their own language. The Ba'athist regime capitalized on the influence of educational institutions to disseminate its ideologies, maintain political power, and promote Arab nationalism and loyalty to the central government. Consequently, Kurdish culture was suppressed and cultural homogenization was imposed, ultimately endangering the preservation of Kurdish identity in the region. These policies not only restricted the ability of Kurds to acquire knowledge in their native language, but also hindered their cultural expression.

Kurdish political parties have played a significant role in facilitating cultural practices, particularly among the rural communities, by engaging directly with the movement, rather than relying on intermediaries such as feudal lords. This direct interaction has instigated a profound transformation in cultural practices among the lower echelons of society, opening up discussions about Kurdish rights and concerns. Due to the interconnection between cultural and societal issues, Kurdish parties have provided a platform for the Kurdish masses to express themselves. This has led to a transformation of their ways of thinking and living, resulting in a movement away from traditional communal and tribal Kurdish culture towards a more mature, open, and cosmopolitan practice. This shift has also made the Kurdish people more receptive to liberation movements. The emergence of Syrian Kurdish literature and music, along with the launch of Radio Yerevan in 1955 in Armenia and the expansion of the broadcast hours of the Kurdish section of Radio Baghdad after 1970,<sup>52</sup> is a testament to the significant cultural and social changes that took place during this period.

Despite the obstacles they face, such as the control of Syrian security and intelligence, Kurdish radio channels and partisan political movements have demonstrated a remarkable ability to connect with the Kurdish masses. This tenacious spirit has taken many shapes, including the Qamishli Uprising in 2004,<sup>53</sup> and active participation in demonstrations, which is evidence of the development of Kurdish national consciousness and the extent of their practice of their identity, even in a country living under a strong security grip. Furthermore, daily socialization, family structures, and various forms of organization have all contributed to the strengthening of Kurdish culture and

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<sup>52</sup> Hoshang Osi, “‘ār Āl’sdiya<sup>2</sup> Allazy Saybqa Yulaḥq ‘wjlan Wahzbah,” [The Disgrace of Assadism that will Continue to Haunt Ocalan and his Party, translation mine - MM], *Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed*, September 23, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Hassan M. Fattah, “Kurds, Emboldened by Lebanon, Rise Up in Tense Syria,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2005.

identity. Social events like Newroz celebrations,<sup>54</sup> Kurdish Student Day, Kurdish Press Day, and Women's Day have also played a significant role in enhancing the sense of community and shared identity among the Kurdish people. These celebrations are a testament to the growth of the Kurds' practice of their culture.

Despite facing numerous challenges and instances of repression, Kurdish activists have remained unwavering in their efforts to safeguard their cultural heritage and uphold the Kurdish language and identity within Syria. Through the preservation of their language, traditions, and social values, Kurds have utilized their cultural traditions to maintain their distinct identity. The transmission of their history and customs to younger generations has been made possible through the use of traditional music, dance, and storytelling - all of which have played a vital role in this endeavor.<sup>55</sup> By emphasizing the unique cultural elements that define them, such as their language and traditions, the Kurdish community has sought to protect their identity, foster a sense of unity, and cultivate a shared sense of belonging. The Kurds have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of policies aimed at assimilation and persecution. Despite facing challenges in their interactions with Arab educational institutions, they have skillfully negotiated their interests to preserve their rich cultural heritage and linguistic practices. While recognizing the importance of education in achieving social and economic success, they have also sought to uphold their cultural identity by adapting to the imposed circumstances. In doing so, they have effectively engaged with authoritarian structures and advocated for Kurdish to be as the official language during significant social events such as weddings and times of mourning. Through promoting ethnic identity, community support and socialization, Kurdish parents have not only prioritized education for their children but also imparted their unique language and culture to them, this transmission of cultural values, norms, language and traditions occurs within the family unit. This approach has played a crucial role in shaping and preserving the identity of Kurdish communities, both within their homeland and in the diaspora.<sup>56</sup> Research shows that when both parents are proficient in their heritage language, children are more likely to learn and use it, resulting in greater cultural preservation.<sup>57</sup>

In summary, the chapter that explores the formation and development of Kurdish national consciousness since the Mandate era is crucial for the rest of the thesis. It sheds light on the societal efforts to maintain Kurdish culture despite the authoritarian structures that aimed to suppress it, as

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<sup>54</sup> "Kurds Blend Mythology, Modernity During Newroz Celebrations," *North Press*, March 20, 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Nirvana Hosheng, "Dengbej: Kurdish Storytellers," *Nishtman Strategy Institute*, October 29, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Sangar Salih, Ervin Matthew, and Annulla Linders, "How Kurdish Immigrant Parents in the United States Think about the Formal and Informal Education of their Sons and Daughters," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* (06), 05 (2017): 79. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2017.56008>

<sup>57</sup> Silvia Place, and Erika Hoff, "Properties of Dual Language Exposure that Influence 2-Year-Olds' Bilingual Proficiency," *Child Development*(6), 82 (2011): 1834-1849. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01660.x>

well as the contributions of Kurdish political parties, cultural clubs, associations, activists, musicians, writers, and journalists. The chapter also examines external influences, such as regional changes and Kurdish revolutions in Iraq and Turkey. Overall, the chapter underscores the Kurdish society's ability to preserve and strengthen its cultural traditions through education and socialization, despite the challenges posed by successive Arab regimes. This resilience and progress in the practice of Kurdish identity have equipped the Kurds to adapt to any future changes that can further enrich their cultural heritage. The resilience of the Kurdish population in Syria and their dedication to preserving their cultural and educational rights, despite facing assimilation efforts by successive governments, played a fundamental dimensions in shaping the transformation of the Kurdish region following the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011.



## Chapter 2: Conversion to Public Practice

### The Legacy of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

While refraining from an in-depth exploration of the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) origins and its association with the Syrian regime, I aim to provide a succinct overview of the PKK's impact on Syrian Kurds. The PKK has played a significant role in fostering Kurdish culture and identity amongst the Syrian Kurds, along with demonstrating exceptional organizational skills and confidence. These contributions have had a lasting impact and have been instrumental in the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. In this regard, I contend that the PKK has been successful in promoting cultural practices, owing to the following factors:

First, in order to contend with nationalist regimes that occupy Kurdish lands “Kurdistan”, the PKK has employed various methods such as influencing societal traditions, contributing to cultural production, and shaping perceptions of Kurdish society. One noteworthy example of this is the establishment of the first Kurdish channel, “Med TV” in 15 May 1995, which broadcasted a diverse array of programs ranging from children's shows, music, and drama to political discussions, documentaries, and news broadcasts.<sup>58</sup> Another significant attempt to revive Kurdish culture was through the formation of musical bands in the diaspora and throughout Kurdistan, with *Koma Berxwedan* “Resistance Band” emerging as a prominent force for transmitting resistance music and mobilizing young people to join the PKK insurgency.<sup>59</sup> As a result of these efforts, national consciousness and Kurdish culture were effectively shaped through the transmission of current events and the repetition of revolutionary songs.

Second, the revitalization of cultural symbols and traditions, such as heroic epics and *Newroz*, to bolster Kurdish national identity and resistance against oppressive forces.<sup>60</sup> Abdullah Öcalan “political prisoner and founding member of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party” himself has linked the epic of *Dewrêşê Evdî* “War Epic Lyric” to the PKK resistance, as documented on multiple occasions.<sup>61</sup> By incorporating historical narratives, cultural practices, and various forms of artistic expression, such as music, festivals, and traditional holidays as well as reviving these activities in Europe,<sup>62</sup> the PKK has successfully cultivated a sense of Kurdish identity among its supporters and

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<sup>58</sup> “Kurdistan is Alive and Well on TV,” *The Independent*, February 21, 1999.

<sup>59</sup> Wendelmoet Hamelink, *The Sung Home : Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016), 334.

<sup>60</sup> Mehmet Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War: Sociopolitical Impacts of the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 88-9.

<sup>61</sup> A video clip of Abdullah Öcalan talking about the lyrical epic of *Dewrêşê Evdî* and linking him to the PKK resistance. <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/Z76U9rVfpmj19GAu/>

<sup>62</sup> Özlem Kayhan Pusane, “Turkey's Military Victory over the PKK and its Failure to End the PKK Insurgency,” *Middle Eastern Studies*(5), 51 (2015): 712. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2014.979801>

within Kurdish communities. This active involvement in cultural production is a deliberate and strategic approach to reviving Kurdish heritage and realizing the PKK's vision for addressing the Kurdish issue.<sup>63</sup> These initiatives are a crucial component of a broader plan to promote Kurdish nationalism and foster cultural independence in the region.

Third, the PKK's strategy of utilizing armed propaganda has yielded favorable results in garnering support for Kurdish nationalism and dissent against oppressive regimes.<sup>64</sup><sup>65</sup> By blending notions of cultural resurgence with messages of rebellion and autonomy, the PKK has effectively rallied Kurdish populations and fostered a collective sense of solidarity and shared purpose. The influence of the PKK in mobilizing the Kurdish population, organizational capacity, and the revival of Kurdish cultural traditions has significantly contributed to the development of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, particularly in the establishment of the Education Authority. The Education Authority's interaction with the Kurdish population is a direct result of the organizational capabilities inherited from the PKK's activities, especially its efforts to revive Kurdish cultural traditions, which have been incorporated into school curricula. In essence, the establishment of the Education Authority represents the culmination of organizational experience and efforts to revive Kurdish culture.

I contend that these three factors have not only enabled the PKK to gain experience in engaging with Kurdish culture and possessing the tools for cultural production through music, but also to organize at the grassroots level as a means of connecting with people.<sup>66</sup> This capacity to involvement individuals directly contributed to the educational body's success in reaching the Kurdish population following the Syrian conflict that began in 2011.

Regarding the PKK's organizational prowess, their operations were conducted with a remarkable level of institutional structure, indicating the effective implementation of administrative and organizational strategies. Alongside their establishment of cultural and musical associations, they were an integral part of a broader transnational Kurdish movement, where members frequently traveled between Europe and Syria to engage in political lobbying, fundraising, and arranging cultural events in support of the Kurdish cause. Furthermore, their endeavors transcended cultural and artistic activities and involved creating political parties. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), a

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<sup>63</sup> Veysi Dag, "The Politics of Cultural Production," *Diaspora Studies*, (2022): 285-86.

<sup>64</sup> Güneş Murat Tezcür, "When Democratization Radicalizes: the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey," *Journal of Peace Research*(6), 47 (2010): 778. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310386156>

<sup>65</sup> Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Violence and Nationalist Mobilization: the Onset of the Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey," *Nationalities Papers*(2), 43 (2015): 249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.970527>

<sup>66</sup> Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts. Volume 2: "Governing Diversity: The Kurds in a New Middle East"* (London; New York City; etc.: I.B. Tauris, 2019): 61.

confederal democratic political party, was founded on December 20, 2003 and remains connected to the PKK through *Koma Civakên Kurdistanê* (KCK) “the Union of Kurdistan Communities”.<sup>67</sup> The impact of the PYD on Syrian Kurds is evident in the broader regional shifts, especially following the power void that resulted from the US-led intervention in Iraq. The PKK has consistently acknowledged the significance of institutions in shaping society, molding identity, and driving mobilization. Every organizational measure taken by the PKK was part of a well-planned institutional approach aimed at advancing Kurdish interests in the area.

I argue that, the institutionalization and social organization at the grassroots level acted as a means to involve Kurds in PKK ideology and facilitate recruitment processes.<sup>68</sup> Even as Turkey's counterinsurgency campaign weakened the PKK militarily by the late 1990s, Özlem Kayhan Pusane, in her article “Turkey's Military Victory over the PKK and Its Failure to End the PKK Insurgency,” pointed out that the organization's complex institutional structure remained largely intact, both within Turkey and abroad.<sup>69</sup> This organizational capacity and intricate structure of the party, both inside and outside Turkey, including in Syria, had a consistent and direct influence on the development of administrative, military, and educational systems in the Kurdish-populated areas of Syria. This influence was a result of the expansion of PKK's influence in the region and its presence in Syria through the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK).

Rather than delving into additional organizational experiences, I will introduce PYD's endeavors in advancing the Kurdish language in relation to research. Since 2005, the Kurdish Language Foundation (SZK) has been operational and has committed itself to the development and instruction of the Kurdish language. This objective has been made possible through volunteers who possess a profound ardor for the language. The inaugural SZK conference was held in Aleppo in 2007.

Delgash was present at that conference, telling the Kurdish Project website: “we were around 100 people and it took four days for us to gather at a certain hour. After the conference, many of the teachers attending the conference, were arrested. I was one of them. They said Arabic is the official language. We said that when the Christians had special schools, why not we have one? And they answered : ‘you are not like them, you make troubles’”.<sup>70</sup> In contrast to other Kurdish parties that also engaged in teaching the Kurdish language, the PKK was the initial entity to organize such activities.

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<sup>67</sup> “The Kurdish Democratic Union Party,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, December 22, 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Allsopp and Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria*, 61.

<sup>69</sup> Pusane, “Turkey's Military,” 728. DOI:10.1080/00263206.2014.979801

<sup>70</sup> Zanyar Omrani, “The History of Kurdish Language in Rojava,” *The Kurdish Project*.  
<https://thekurdishproject.org/history-kurdish-language-rojava/>

### The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)

In July 19, 2012, the Kurdish regions of Syria experienced an informal separation from the central government in Damascus, specifically in Kobani, in favor of the Democratic Union Party (PYD).<sup>7172</sup> Following the withdrawal of the Syrian government from the Kurdish regions, all state institutions remained intact. This event sparked rapid shifts in power dynamics within the region, culminating in the formation of *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG) “the People's Protection Units” that same month. In 2016, the formation of the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” and subsequently in 2018, the establishment of the “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria” signified a significant departure from the centralized governance framework inherent in the Syrian state. The initiative was created to establish a framework through which local communities could exercise self-governance and tackle internal challenges. The Autonomous Administration made efforts to unify the various factions in the region under its institutions, leading to the creation of *Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk (HSD)* “the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)” in October 2015. This multi-ethnic alliance, led primarily by the People's Protection Units and supported by the United States, strengthened the Kurdish YPG as a significant force in the fight against extremist groups, especially ISIS.<sup>7374</sup>

The PYD and subsequently the Autonomous Administration have demonstrated relative successes in governance, as evidenced by their efforts to establish and sustain a diverse array of institutions encompassing the military, police, judiciary, service facilities, and education. The aforementioned statement is applicable in any governmental context. When referring to “relative success,” it is in the context of the Syrian conflict and internal divisions. In comparison to the areas under opposition control, these endeavors are deemed as relative successes (More details in Chapter 5). Despite grappling with intricate geopolitical circumstances and encountering resistance from multiple sources, the Autonomous Administration has effectively solidified its authority over the northeastern region of Syria. The Autonomous Administration gradually gained control of Education Authority and actively enforced its Kurdish-language curricula on areas with Kurdish populations in a phased approach. Initially, in 2014, it introduced 5 hours of Kurdish-language instruction for

<sup>71</sup> Kheder Khaddour, “The Assad Regim's Hold on the Syrian State,” *Carnegie*, (July, 2015): 12.

<sup>72</sup> Spencer Louis Potiker, “Exit-with-Autonomy or Autonomy-without-Exit? Divergent Political Trajectories in Rojava and the Kurdish Regional Government,” *Critical Sociology*(1), 49 (2021): 123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211048547>

<sup>73</sup> Victor Beattie, “Congressman: US-led Airstrikes Have ‘Minimal Impact’ on IS,” *VOA*, December 28, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/4xwvrvavh>

<sup>74</sup> Khoushnaw Tillo, “Lights on the Emergence Backgrounds of the de Facto Autonomy of North and East Syria (nes). Its Features of Quasi State and Interdependence with Roots of the Kurdish Question in Syria,” *Review of Nationalities*(1), 12 (2022): 133-155. <https://doi.org/10.2478/pn-2022-0011>

primary students and later expanded the program to include the preparatory stage.<sup>75</sup> A significant milestone in this endeavor was the development of its own school curricula in 2016, which was subsequently implemented in around 600 schools across the region. Within a year of introducing its Kurdish-language curricula, it was made mandatory for all schools in Kurdish-populated areas through strict decisions. On August 7, 2018, the Education Authority of the Autonomous Administration in Al-Jazeera District issued a letter to all schools directing them to shut down within 24 hours for teaching unapproved curricula.<sup>76</sup>

Even though the decisions made by the Education Authority were authoritarian, it's important to note that the reintroduction of education in Kurdish-majority areas over the past years has played a significant role in revitalizing and celebrating Kurdish culture. The lifting of the ban on Kurdish culture and the encouragement of its practice in public spaces has led to a resurgence of Kurdish cultural traditions. A notable example of this was at the graduation ceremony of a class of students at the University of Kobani on June 1, 2024, where a group of Kurdish women dressed in traditional attire led the graduating class, playing the *Êldefî*, a “traditional Kurdish drum”.<sup>77</sup> This tradition reflects the joy of the Kurdish community in their folk heritage. Overall, the Education Authority's efforts have contributed to the revival of forgotten Kurdish cultural traditions, bringing them back into the public sphere.

Mari Toivanen's book *The Kobane Generation* sheds light on the activism of second-generation diaspora members following the Battle of Kobane and examines its connection to wider political changes on a global scale.<sup>78</sup> As I perceive it, the Battle of Kobani and the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria have played a significant role in redefining citizenship and power dynamics, particularly in the Education Authority. In addition, the practice of Kurdish culture has undergone a transformation. This is a rare development in the modern history of Syria, as it has become both public and institutionalized. Notably, the activities of the Kurdish Language Foundation (SZK) and the Culture and Arts Foundation have been made public and integrated into the Education Authority and the Culture Authority. It is important to note that the Education Authority has made it mandatory for schools to adhere to its curricula, thereby preventing the opening of schools that do not comply.

By means of institutional initiatives, the traditional Kurdish folk culture, which had been reinforced through socialization, has been transformed into a school-based upbringing. However, my

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<sup>75</sup> Julnar Abdel Karim, “Āllugha<sup>2</sup> ālkurdiya<sup>2</sup> fi Mdārs Āl’ dāra<sup>2</sup> Āldhātiya<sup>2</sup> “Frd ‘yn”,” [The Kurdish Language in Autonomous Administration Schools “Fardh Ayn”, translation mine - MM], *Ana Press*, February 26, 2017.

<sup>76</sup> “Autonomous Administration Closes Schools Run by Christians,” *Syrian for Truth and Justice*, September 10, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/G4nFqqRTW3xXxt4V/>

<sup>78</sup> Mari Toivanen, *The Kobane Generation: Kurdish Diaspora Mobilising in France* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021).

argument is that Kurdish children who have completed more than five years in school are able to speak the Kurdish language fluently and more purely compared to before. Furthermore, they are capable of reading and writing with greater proficiency than their parents.<sup>79</sup> Social media platforms have been rife with video clips highlighting the lack of understanding between parents and their children.<sup>80</sup>

The proper practice of Kurdish language was once limited to a small group of individuals who had to learn in secret due to the absence of Kurdish schools. However, the scenario has changed, and learning is available to everyone. The Kurdish Language Foundation (SZK) offers courses to employees of the Autonomous Administration,<sup>82</sup> and the enrollment of both students and teachers in school education is increasing. Additionally, the Kurdish language has been made an official language in the records of the Autonomous Administration. These developments indicate progress in the practice of Kurdish language and culture. In chapter 4, I will delve deeper into these statistics. It is worth noting that anyone can now learn to read and write Kurdish, regardless of their age or educational level.<sup>83</sup> Reports suggest that approximately 50,000 students of all ages, including the elderly, receiving education in their mother tongue.<sup>84</sup> This is a testament to the rapid and radical development in the practice of Kurdish culture, which motivates the broader Kurdish community to learn and follow this progress, and potentially pursue job opportunities with the Autonomous Administration.

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge the role played by the Autonomous Administration, particularly the Education Authority, in the development and preservation of Kurdish culture. Their unwavering commitment to fostering the Kurdish language and cultural traditions has been instrumental. This institutional work and engagement with Kurdish culture is a continuation of the PKK's legacy and comes as no surprise. Furthermore, the post-2011 dynamics and factors that emerged in Syria, including involvement, vacuum and adaptation, will be elaborated in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. It is crucial to recognize that the legacy of the PKK, the Kurds' struggle in Syria, and the evolution of the Kurdish political movement are enduring and pivotal elements driving the ongoing transformations, with the efforts initiated after 2011 serving as a natural extension of this legacy.

<sup>79</sup> Bashar Youssef, “‘nahum Yatahdhwn LughatTakhtalf ‘n Ālkurdiya Āllaty Kunā Natahdth Biha Sabiqān,” [They Speak a Language Different from the Kurdish We Used to Speak Before, translation mine - MM], *Syria Untold*, April 2, 2024.

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/hBFszSpdySgTxZJP/>

<sup>81</sup> [https://youtu.be/1koS-jgS\\_mk?si=zEF\\_qLJt\\_ove76Xw](https://youtu.be/1koS-jgS_mk?si=zEF_qLJt_ove76Xw)

<sup>82</sup> “Wfd Min ‘dāra² Muqāt² a² Ālfurat Yushark Binedwa² hwareya² Lijām² a² Kwbany Bmunāsba² Ywm Allugha² Ālkurdiya²,” [A Felegation from the Euphrates District Administration Participates in a Dialogue Seminar at the University of Kobani on the Occasion of Kurdish Language Day, translation mine - MM], *AANES Media*, May 15, 2024.

<sup>83</sup> Akram Barakat, “Āllugha² Ālkurdiya² ‘nqdht Ālshakhsya² Ālkurdiya² Min Ālsahr,” [The Kurdish language Saved the Kurdish Personality from Assimilation, translation mine - MM], *ANHA*, November 18, 2020.

<sup>84</sup> “Thousands Receiving Kurdish Language Education in Syrian Kurdistan's Jazeera Canton,” *EKurd Daily*, May 14, 2014. <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/5/syriakurd1185.htm>

Consequently, there has been a notable shift in the public embrace of Kurdish cultural practices, moving from private and clandestine spheres to educational and public domains. This shift has, in turn, contributed to the advancement of Kurdish culture.



### Chapter 3: Additional Influential Organizations

In this chapter, I will be discussing the rivalry between the institutions of the Autonomous Administration and other Kurdish parties not associated with it, in terms of promoting Kurdish culture. The vacuum contributed to the Autonomous Administration taking the lead and focusing on Kurdish culture, while also providing an opportunity for other parties to develop and compete with the Autonomous Administration in terms of Kurdish cultural contributions. I will examine the evolution of the relationship between Autonomous Administration institutions and Kurdish culture, influenced by competition from external parties. The promotion of Kurdish culture extended beyond educational institutions to include cultural and media organizations associated with the Autonomous Administration and those unrelated to it. As a result, I have dedicated a separate chapter in my thesis to this topic. Although these cultural and media organizations operate independently from the Educational Authority, they are integral parts of the Autonomous Administration. Additionally, there are cultural and media institutions in northeastern Syria that are not affiliated with the Autonomous Administration. All these entities collaborate and compete in cultural production and the advancement of Kurdish cultural practices. The cumulative impact of these diverse factors and organizations has significantly contributed to the resurgence and strengthening of Kurdish cultural practices. Therefore, this chapter is essential for understanding the role of the Educational Authority in the broader efforts to promote Kurdish culture and its preservation.

Kurdish educational, cultural, and media institutions have engaged in cultural production, alongside other Kurdish parties. This has resulted not only in the preservation and practice of Kurdish cultural traditions but also in the development of various cultural forms such as music, theatre, cinema, and publishing houses. Music, in particular, has received significant attention due to its crucial role in Kurdish society during times of conflict and turmoil. It serves as a means of maintaining positivity, providing comfort, and fostering a sense of identity during difficult times.<sup>85</sup> Since 2011, cultural expressions such as music have been instrumental in reasserting Kurdish ethnic and cultural identity, especially through digital media. The Culture Authority has worked to establish institutions dedicated solely to developing Kurdish music and musical traditions, such as: *Hunergeha Welat* “Homeland Art”,<sup>86</sup> *Hunergeha Welat Zarok* “Homeland Art Childeren”,<sup>87</sup> *Pargîn* “Adding”,<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> “Dwr Ālkurd fy Ālmuwsiyqā Walghna’,” [The Role of the Kurds in Music and Singing, translation mine - MM], *Yekiti*, October 14, 2016.

<sup>86</sup> <https://youtube.com/@hunergehawelat?si=fFW1s9RwDuprL04g>

<sup>87</sup> <https://youtube.com/@hunergehawelatzarok8236?si=s5K2qZNXQx5Z4thf>

<sup>88</sup> <https://youtube.com/@pargin5550?si=qnz-wttbMhuNoOnx>

*Orkêstra Zarok û Ciwanên Rojava* “Children's Orchestra in northern Syria”,<sup>89</sup> *Hîlala Zêrîn* “Golden Crescent”.<sup>90</sup>

Due to the sheer number of cultural institutions that exist, it is difficult to discuss all of their offerings. However, I will highlight one such institution called *Hunergeha Welat*. This establishment specializes in traditional Kurdish music and has adapted it to suit contemporary tastes. They produce visually stunning video clips that showcase traditional Kurdish clothing and dances.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, other Kurdish cultural institutions outside of the Autonomous Administration have emerged, such as the Waar channel. This channel focuses on Kurdish culture and features a variety of programs,<sup>92</sup> including the popular *Mehdî Mêvan* “Guest Mehdî” show where he visit important artists in the Kurdish community.<sup>93</sup> Another notable institution is Radio Arta FM, located in Qamishli. They produce documentary programs that feature interviews with Syrian Kurdish singers.<sup>94</sup> Radio Arta FM has faced harassment from the Autonomous Administration in the past.

It's important to acknowledge that a multitude of cultural institutions exist, some affiliated with the Autonomous Administration, such as *Çand û Hûner* “Culture and Art”, while others operate independently. These institutions showcase a diverse range of Kurdish cultural expressions. The competition among them plays a significant role in promoting the growth of Kurdish cinema and theater, as well as facilitating art exhibitions and cultural festivals. One such festival is the *Festîvala Fîlmên Kurdî li Amsterdamê* “Kurdish Film Festival in Amsterdam”.<sup>95</sup>

In my quest to gain insights into the state of cinema following the Syrian conflict since 2011, I reached out to the writer and film director Can Bapîr via WhatsApp. Mr. Bapîr, previously participated in the Manifesto Film Festival in Amsterdam with his film *Strana Şikestî* “Broken Songs,” “explained that after 2011, a newfound sense of freedom emerged. This freedom has paved the way for the development of Kurdish cinema, which for decades had been hindered by the censorship apparatus of the Syrian regime. While strides have been made in recent years, the Kurdish cinematic identity still remains somewhat indistinct. However, there has been significant progress in the production of video clips for traditional Kurdish songs, as well as the development of show singing and expressive dances”.<sup>96</sup> Notably, the Autonomous Administration's keen interest in Kurdish music and singing traditions stems from the significance of singing within Kurdish culture. It is

<sup>89</sup> <https://youtube.com/@orkestrazarokuciwanenroj4259?si=5JS9g2Dh0aM10G17>

<sup>90</sup> <https://youtube.com/@hilalazerin4071?si=qjPNbx8II5PAuLG>

<sup>91</sup> <https://youtu.be/VIHuQrM89Zs?si=z5eoxZEmpMRJWV4Q>

<sup>92</sup> <https://youtube.com/@waarmedia1?si=Swj2n01QOTNGuFRq>

<sup>93</sup> [https://youtu.be/-1w81OmCW-Q?si=U\\_ktJyXOZbz0j2nl](https://youtu.be/-1w81OmCW-Q?si=U_ktJyXOZbz0j2nl)

<sup>94</sup> [https://youtu.be/7QcFW-PVcNc?si=ZIAmj1vPa\\_9Pi-lB](https://youtu.be/7QcFW-PVcNc?si=ZIAmj1vPa_9Pi-lB)

<sup>95</sup> <https://akff.nl/>

<sup>96</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Can Bapîr, Writer and Film Director, May 23, 2024.

regarded as the sole Kurdish cultural form that has persisted without interruption, underscoring its importance among the Kurdish people. Rather, I believe that this enthusiasm for music could be seen as an expansion of the PKK's historical use of Kurdish music and cultural practices as a means to propagate its ideology in the past, and now, to advocate for the Autonomous Administration project. This interest in music may have played a role in people's engagement with the new governing system and educational environment.

My focus will shift from Competition for visual and audio content to producing written material. I will limit my scope to publishing houses and refrain from mentioning newspapers and magazines. It's worth noting that these publishing houses primarily cater to the Kurdish population and focus on Kurdish issues. They publish their works in Kurdish and Arabic languages, with a target audience of Kurdish readers. Recently, publishing houses linked to the Autonomous Administration have emerged, such as the Kurdish Language Foundation's (SZK) publishing house, which specializes in publishing books related to Kurdish language, literature, and translation. Another noteworthy publishing house is *Şilêr* "Liquid" publishing and distribution house, which opened in Qamishli in March 2017. Mrs. Zara Muhammad, who works at *Şilêr*, stated to the *Jadaliyya* website that "they used to publish 40 to 50 titles during the first two years, but in recent years, they have increased their output to 100 titles annually".<sup>97</sup> On the contrary, there has been a rise in independent publishing houses not associated with the Autonomous Administration and run by cultural figures. One such example is *Neqîş* "Carving", which was established in Qamishli at the end of 2019. Despite being a fledgling publishing house, *Neqîş* has already released roughly 55 books in both Kurdish and Arabic.<sup>98</sup> Another notable establishment is *Ava* "Reconstruction", which acquired licenses from both the Culture Authority in the Autonomous Administration and a European licensing organization. Since its inception on August 1, 2019, *Ava* House has been printing approximately 25 titles per year, and has published 98 books to date. Şerzad Besrawî, the director of the publishing house in Syria, informed me via WhatsApp that these books are distributed in regions where the Syrian Kurdish population is concentrated, Iraq and Europe.<sup>99</sup>

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of various perspectives, in addition to consulting experts, I had a conversation with Şerzad Besrawî via WhatsApp, the proprietor of the publishing house *Ava*. Mr. Besrawî emphasized that "he frequently receives inquiries from readers regarding the availability of more books in the Kurdish language, particularly from the younger generation. He noted that the younger generation is more proficient in the Kurdish language than in

<sup>97</sup> Suzan Al-Mahmoud, "Waq' Ālnashr Walqrā'a<sup>2</sup> fy Shmāl Sharqy Suwriyā," [The Reality of Publishing and Reading in Northeastern Syria, translation mine - MM], *Jadaliyya*, February 2, 2022. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/43837>

<sup>98</sup> Al-Mahmoud, "Waq' Ālnashr."

<sup>99</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Şerzad Besrawî, Director of *Ava* Printing and Publishing House, May 13, 2024.

Arabic and therefore seeks translations of certain Arabic publications. Additionally, he mentioned that two-thirds of book sales in Kurdish areas in Syria are works written in the Kurdish language, as opposed to one-third in Arabic”.<sup>100</sup> I conclude from Mr. Besrawî’s interview that the demand for publications in the Kurdish language is driven by competition between different publishing houses, both affiliated with the Autonomous Administration and independent, to offer quality content in Kurdish. Additionally, the increasing ability of the Kurdish population to read and write in their own language is noteworthy. This growth in Kurdish literacy is attributed to the efforts of the Education Authority and the Kurdish Language Foundation. Compared to the time before the Syrian conflict, the spread of Kurdish literacy has greatly expanded, contributing to the strengthening of Kurdish culture through contestation and combined efforts of cultural, media, and educational institutions.

Accompanying the movement in writing and publishing were book fairs and cultural initiatives that advocated for reading in the Kurdish language. One such project was *Hinar* “Pomegranate” and was launched in 2016-2018 to protect Kurdish language and heritage. It was the first cultural project to be published solely in Kurdish language in *Rojava*. The project supervisor, Zohrab Qado, stated to the Jadaliyya website that “*Hinar* aimed to document and collect the oral heritage of the region. The project published various works, including stories, novels, poetry, thought, music, children's stories, and research. In addition, they translated eight books from Arabic and French into Kurdish and published a book about Kurdish singer Mihemed Şêxo and notes for piano. The project aspired to translate more international literary works into the Kurdish language”.<sup>101</sup>

It is important to note that all of the institutions mentioned were gradually established and activated after 2011. However, I would like to clarify that the competition was not limited to internal rivalry among institutions affiliated with or unaffiliated with the Autonomous Administration in the Kurdish population areas of Syria. Rather, it escalated into a cross-border competition between cultural institutions affiliated with the Autonomous Administration and institutions closely related to it, such as *Tevgera Çand û hunera Demokratîk a Mezopotamya* “Movement of Culture and Democratic Art of Mesopotamia”. This institution, which was founded in 1991 in Istanbul, Turkey and is now headquartered in Germany, has been working to showcase Kurdish art and culture.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Şêrzad Besrawî.

<sup>101</sup> Al-Mahmoud, “Waq’ Ālnashr.”

<sup>102</sup> <https://youtube.com/@tevcand2153?feature=shared>

Movement of Culture and Democratic Art of Mesopotamia competes to promote Kurdish culture and cultural production through festivals, concerts, and other institutional cultural activities.<sup>103</sup>

The internal and external rivalries has significantly influenced how individuals engage with the autonomous administration in promoting Kurdish culture. Despite the challenges, this healthy competition has fostered Kurdish cultural practices, facilitated the creation of high-quality cultural works, and established effective institutional mechanisms. It's important to highlight that cultural, educational, and media institutions, whether affiliated with the Autonomous Administration or operating independently, contribute to the development of other institutions. The Kurdish Language Foundation, which is associated with the Education Authority, may have had the most impact on fostering interest in Kurdish culture by striving to teach the Kurdish population the Kurdish language, enabling them to read, write, and engage with other Kurdish cultural institutions.

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<sup>103</sup> Schäfers Marlene, "Tracing Connections: Kurdish Women Singers and the Ambiguities of Owning Oral Tradition," In *Diversity and Contact among Singer-Poet Traditions in Eastern Anatolia*, ed. Martin Greve, Wendelmoet Hamelink, and Ulas Özdemir (Würzburg: Ergon, 2019), 79-80.



## Chapter 4: Involvement

The main research question has centered on how educational institutions foster Kurdish culture and its preservation. The answer lies in the determination of the Kurds in Syria, shaped by their collective struggle, as well as the enduring legacy of the PKK. Furthermore, the Educational Authority plays a role in the broader initiative led by cultural and media institutions affiliated with or independent from the Autonomous Administration, all working towards the promotion and advancement of Kurdish culture. In this chapter and in Chapters 5 and 6, I will explore the dynamics that have shaped the interaction between the Education Authority and the Kurdish population. These dynamics represent new elements that have influenced the development of Autonomous Administration institutions, particularly in the education sector, and encompass involvement, vacuum and adaptation. It's important to note that these factors are interconnected and cannot be examined in isolation. However, I will endeavor to categorize and organize these factors in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities that impact the relationship between the Kurdish community in Syria and the Education Authority.

Involvement here refers not only to voluntary and spontaneous involvement but also forced participation, particularly given the Autonomous Administration's organizational and institutional form since its establishment in January 2014 and the availability of means of force and order imposition through the previously establishment of the *Asayîsha Rojava* “Internal Security Forces” in 2012,<sup>104</sup> and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2015. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has taken steps to regulate society and engage it in the governing system, through various means such as implementing mandatory conscription for self-defense purposes and enacting laws to strengthen the defense institution - the Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>105</sup> This inclusive approach extends to all facets of society, including a system of joint presidency between men and women to promote gender equality in political, social, administrative, and other spheres.<sup>106</sup>

Prior to discussing involvement in the educational sector, I would like to offer insight into the current educational environment in northeastern Syria. In an interview for the AANES website, Rajab al-Musharraf, co-chair of the Education Authority in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, highlighted that “there are three distinct curricula being taught within the Autonomous Administration areas. The first curriculum is delivered in Kurdish and is aimed at

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<sup>104</sup> “Hêzên Ewlekariya Hundirîn li Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyê,” [Internal Security Forces in Northern and Eastern Syria, translation mine - MM], *Asayîsh*, February 02, 2021.

<sup>105</sup> “AANES Adopts Amendments to Conscription Laws,” *Anab Baladi*, February 22, 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/648ubf89>

<sup>106</sup> “Āl' qd Āl' timā' y Āl' jadid Lil' dāra² Āldhātaya² Āldymuqratya² Ly' qlim Skamāl Washarq Suwriya²,” [The New Social Contract for the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, translation mine - MM], *ANHA*, December 13, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/2xu2cu5z>

Kurds within the Al-Jazeera and Euphrates regions, as well as those displaced in the Afrin and Al-Shahba camps located in the Aleppo countryside. The second curriculum is the official Syrian education curriculum which is taught in schools and educational complexes within Manbij and its surrounding areas. The third curriculum is a self-learning program delivered in Arabic that targets Arabs residing in regions such as Raqqa, Al-Tabqah, and Deir ez-Zor. Additionally, UNICEF has agreed to teach the curriculum in Al-Tabqah, the Raqqa Governorate, and various cities and towns within the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor.”<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, there are private church schools in Qamishli and Al-Jazeera, catering to the Syrians and Armenians and teaching the school curricula of the Syrian regime.

The first step involves the Education Authority making decisions regarding compulsory education in its associated schools located in Kurdish-populated areas. This action resulted in the discontinuation of the formal education system implemented by the Syrian regime in Kurdish-populated regions. The ongoing internal conflict in Syria has made it risky and difficult for students to reach areas controlled by the Syrian regime, especially given that we are referring to school education, not university education. Furthermore, the country's challenging economic conditions have made this almost impossible. These developments are particularly noteworthy during times of chaos and war, which have caused many children to be excluded from school. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), roughly 2.4 million children throughout Syria are currently out of school, which equates to half of all school-age children in the nation.<sup>108</sup>

The second step of the plan involves increasing job opportunities within the educational institution to encourage participation. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria provides competitive salaries<sup>109</sup> that have enticed skilled professionals to join the education sector. As a result, teachers have benefited from increased job opportunities and the reopening of schools, along with the attractive salaries offered by the Education Authority compared to the regime's regions. According to the International Crisis Group's report titled “Promoting Fragile Recovery in Raqqa,” the Autonomous Administration offers salaries ten times higher than the regime, in addition to maintaining a relatively secure environment and effective institutions, despite the regime's control

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<sup>107</sup> “Ālnizām Ālt’lymy fi Shmāl Washarq Suwriya<sup>2</sup> .. Bdāya<sup>2</sup> Āntlāqh Wttwyr Munhaj,” [The Educational System in Northern and Eastern Syria...the Beginning of its Launch and the Development of a Curriculum, translation mine - MM], AANES, March 2, 2023. <https://aanesgov.org/?p=2582>

<sup>108</sup> “B’d 13 ‘āman min Ālniza’ fy Suwriya, ‘şbah ‘dd Āl’tfāl Āldhyn Yhtajon ‘lā Almusā’dā<sup>2</sup> Āl’nsānyā<sup>2</sup> Wlfurşā<sup>2</sup> ‘kbr min ‘y Wqt Māda,” [After 13 Years of Conflict in Syria, the Number of Children in Need of Humanitarian Assistance and Opportunity is Greater than Ever Before, translation mine - MM], UNICEF, March 14, 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/4jjzwc63>

<sup>109</sup> Amy Austin Holmes, “Delinking from Damascus: The Economic Underpinnings of Political Autonomy,” in *Statelet of Survivors: The Making of a Semi-Autonomous Region in Northeast Syria* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2024), 129.

over other areas.<sup>110</sup> The success of the Autonomous Administration in reopening schools can be attributed to the fact that its schools suffered less damage than those in other parts of Syria, and the region is rich in energy and agricultural resources.

I argue that the educational institution has implemented a nationalist approach that contradicts the principles of a democratic nation it purports to uphold. This is evident in the implementation of the strictest ban in areas with Kurdish populations, while areas with Arab populations were given the option to follow the regime's official curriculum or pursue self-study curricula in Arabic. This deliberate restriction of access to Arabic-language education can be viewed as a strategic effort to assert and consolidate the authority of the Autonomous Administration over educational and cultural matters, ultimately reshaping the educational landscape in Kurdish-populated areas. In addition to the challenging wartime conditions and economic conflicts, competitive salaries for educators played a significant role in their decision to align with the new educational framework. Although these measures were authoritarian, they brought about rapid and profound changes that contributed to the preservation and advancement of Kurdish culture.

### Education Authority for North and East Syria

In an effort to redefine citizenship and membership within the region, the establishment of the Education Authority was a crucial step in a broader strategy. This approach to reshaping citizenship and fostering the growth of future generations of citizens beyond traditional state boundaries is a testament to the governance model and societal structure being cultivated in the region. In an interview with the Alarab website, Sînem Şêrxanî Mihemmed, the head of the office of *Meclîsa Sûriya Demokratîk* "Syrian Democratic Council" in Washington, emphasized the importance of equal citizenship as a revolutionary alternative to the oppressive Baathist regime. She stated that the current regime has caused immense suffering for Syrians of all cultural, societal, and political backgrounds.<sup>111</sup> (More information on the redefinition of citizenship can be found in Chapter 5). The Education Authority has a critical role in incorporating values into the educational curriculum, and has actively pursued the promotion of education as one of the pillars of its management structure. It is noteworthy that the Education Authority has divided its committees based on regions that are separated by the Autonomous Administration. Specifically, there are seven committees, namely the

<sup>110</sup> "Syria: Shoring Up Raqqa's Shaky Recovery," *International Crisis Group*, November 18, 2021.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/229-syria-shoring-raqqas-shaky-recovery>

<sup>111</sup> Marah Al-Bikai, "krād Suwriyā .. min Mqşla² Ālshwfynta² 'lā Rihāb Ālmwāṭna²," [Syrian Kurds... From the Guillotine of Chauvinism to the Embrace of Citizenship, translation mine - MM], *Alarab*, February 29, 2020.

<https://tinyurl.com/48puv9yc>

Education Committee in the Deir ez-Zor region, the Al-Shahba region, Afrin, the Euphrates region, Al-Tabqah region, the Manbij region, the Raqqa region, and the Al-Jazeera region.

As part of my research efforts to gather information on the activities of the Education Authority, I reached out to Ms. Ferîde Seîd Ibrahîm, the responsible authority for the relations office of the Education Authority in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. My inquiry was focused on obtaining statistics related to the number of schools, students, and teachers in *Rojava*. As my research revolves around developing Kurdish cultural awareness, I focused on statistics related to the Kurdish population areas only because the rest of the Arab population areas teach curricula in the Arabic, which is a topic outside the research. Ms. Ibrahim provided me with statistics specifically related to Kurdish-majority areas in which the curricula are taught in the Kurdish. These areas include Al-Jazeera, Euphrates, and Afrin, in addition to the statistics of northeastern Syria as a whole. The data I received is as follows:

*The number of students, teachers and schools belonging to the Board of Education and Training of North and East Syria 2023-2024:*<sup>112</sup>

|  | Students | Teachers | Schools |
|--|----------|----------|---------|
| Al-Jazeera Canton                        | 202879   | 15815    | 1778    |
| Euphrates Canton                         | 67815    | 3392     | 560     |
| Afrin Canton                             | 13658    | 1024     | 61      |
| The total number in North and East Syria | 832815   | 40239    | 4126    |

Upon thorough examination of the statistics, it becomes apparent that the Education Authority has successfully involved a significant number of Kurdish students and teachers into its institution. This achievement can be attributed to the legacy of the PKK, which has effectively reached grassroots levels and demonstrated the ability to engage with the broader community, in addition to strict decisions. This exemplifies the Autonomous Administration's commitment to using education as a tool for connecting with people and enriching the Kurdish cultural heritage. In addition, the Autonomous Administration has consistently prioritized the reinstatement of the Kurdish language and culture as a central tenet of their political agenda.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>112</sup> WhatsApp interview with Ferîde Seîd Ibrahîm, Responsible Authority for the Relations Office of the Education Authority in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, April 17, 2024.

<sup>113</sup> Yazan Badran, "Syria: A Fragmented Media System," in *Arab Media Systems*, ed. Carola Richter and Claudia Kozman (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 20.

It's important to note that accurately analyzing the changes is challenging due to the unavailability of statistics from the Syrian regime before 2011 for comparison with current statistics. Moreover, in many cities with a Kurdish majority, there are also Arab students, and a significant number of Kurds left Syria after 2011. These factors make it difficult to conduct a comparative study or measure the changes. Instead, I gathered current statistics and conducted interviews with education stakeholders, including teacher Abdulah Selahdîn via WhatsApp, who teaches Kurdish language, and *Çand û Sinc* “Culture and Ethics”. Mr. Selahdîn emphasized that “Kurdish children in previously Kurdish areas in Syria used to acquire their cultural identity from their families and through playing with other children in the community. However, nowadays, children learn about their Kurdish culture in schools. He also stressed that schools play a crucial and effective role in shaping the cultural identity of the younger generation.”<sup>114</sup>

Alongside their efforts to develop the school educational system, the Autonomous Administration and the Education Authority collaborated to establish universities. These institutions have played a pivotal role in promoting alternative state system models, and addressing community needs by forging strong partnerships that produce capable and driven leaders. To further support this initiative, companies were established in partnership with Autonomous Administration institutions to train and develop qualified professionals. The region has witnessed significant educational transformations, including the introduction of new school curricula, which necessitated the establishment of educational institutions. Consequently, departments of Kurdish literature and teacher education were opened, which have received a positive response from students.

Thanks to the Autonomous Administration's efforts, three universities were established, the first being the University of Afrin in August 2015. This university offers programs in literature, engineering, and economics, as well as institutes in medicine, topographical engineering, music, theater, business administration, and the Kurdish language. Following the Turkish army invaded Afrin in 2018, many of its students were transferred to Rojava University in Qamishli.<sup>115</sup> The second university, *Rojava* University, was established in July 2016 in the city of Qamishli. The language of instruction is Kurdish, and it includes faculties of medicine, engineering, science, arts, and humanities. Programs taught include Sanitary Engineering, Computer and Agricultural Engineering, Physics, Chemistry, History, Psychology, Geography, Mathematics, Primary School Teaching, and Kurdish Literature.<sup>116</sup> The university also has a College of Petroleum located in the oil-rich city of

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<sup>114</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Abdulah Selahdîn, Teacher of the Kurdish language, and “Culture and Ethics”, May 25, 2024.

<sup>115</sup> “Afrin University Students Continuing their Studies at Rojava's University,” *Hawar News Agency*. June 29, 2018.

<sup>116</sup> “Kurds Establish University in Rojava Amid Syrian Instability,” *Kurdistan24*. July 7, 2016.

Rimelan.<sup>117</sup> The third university, the University of Kobani, was established in October 2017 and began with two colleges: the College of Arts/Department of Kurdish Language and Literature and the College of Natural Sciences/Department of Chemistry and Physics. Over the years, the number of colleges, departments, and students increased, and in 2021, the Institute of Graduate Studies, Department of Kurdish Language and Literature, was opened.<sup>118</sup> Finally, there is Al-Sharq University in Raqqa, which is the fourth university, this university is the only one in the Arabic language and located in areas with Arab populations.

I have recently had the opportunity to connect with numerous Kurdish students to gain insights into their perspectives. Among them, I had a conversation with Ceylan Şahîn over WhatsApp. Mrs. Şahîn shared her educational journey, beginning with attending schools under the Syrian regime at the primary level, then transitioning to Kurdish schools under the Education Authority. Currently, she is pursuing studies in *Ziman û wêjeya Erebî* “Arabic Language and Literature” at the University of Kobani. During our discussion, “she expressed that children who have the opportunity to learn in their mother tongue in Kurdish schools are fortunate, as they are not faced with the challenge of navigating between two languages for home and school. While she holds a deep appreciation for the Arabic language, which she studies, she emphasized that the previous mandatory Arabic education had a detrimental impact on the Kurdish language and hindered the development and enrichment of Kurdish culture.”<sup>119</sup> In my extensive interviews with Kurdish students in Kurdish-populated areas of northern Syria and by comparing their opinions with the efforts of the Education Authority, it became evident that the Education Authority not only enforced mandatory laws in schools but also actively involved students in understanding the significance of promoting Kurdish culture, history, and language through education. The students demonstrated a keen awareness of the importance of this move toward education in the Kurdish language. However, they expressed concerns about the recognition of their education and academic certificates if the Kurdish political and military efforts were unsuccessful. Nonetheless, this concern did not diminish their understanding and appreciation of the significance of the new educational initiatives.

It is my contention that the Education Authority adopted a nationalist approach towards regions with Kurdish populations, actively working to advance and establish the Kurdish language, which had previously been subject to prohibition policies. The establishment of three universities offering education in the Kurdish language, compared to just one university offering education in

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<sup>117</sup> “Afrin University students”.

<sup>118</sup> University of Kobani, An Overview of the University, <https://www.kobani-uni.ac/ar/Damezrandin%C3%BBd%C3%AErok%C3%A7e>

<sup>119</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Ceylan Şahîn, A student studying “Arabic Language and Literature” at the University of Kobani, May 23, 2024.

Arabic, appears to reflect the natural predisposition of the Kurdish community for any initiatives that would elevate the status of the Kurdish language and culture. In addition, the Education Authority's efforts to promote Kurdish culture. Conversely, the presence of only one university offering education in Arabic, with limited demand from the Arab population, can be attributed to the availability of other Arabic-language universities in regime areas. This rationale seems reasonable to Arab students, particularly given the contentious nature surrounding the recognition of these universities in the future.

### **Kurdish Language Foundation (SZK)**

Established in 2005, the Kurdish Language Foundation has been dedicated to the development and teaching of the Kurdish language through the efforts of volunteers who share a deep passion for the Kurdish language. Over time, these efforts have evolved into a collective and institutional endeavor. Today, the foundation is a proud member of the Education Council of the Autonomous Administration, and it maintains close relationships with the Kurdish Institute in Belgium, Stockholm, and Denmark, as well as the Kurdish Institute in Istanbul and the Movement of Culture and Democratic Art of Mesopotamia. Throughout its existence, the foundation has been dedicated to offering Kurdish language and literature lessons as a discreet and informal service to all who seek to learn. Even today, it continues to offer online classes to Kurds living in the diaspora who wish to learn to read and write.<sup>120</sup> SZK has effectively utilized social media promotions, creating content that ranges from basic educational clips for novices to in-depth episodes discussing cultural traditions. As a result, the promotion of Kurdish culture has thrived on social media platforms.<sup>121</sup>

The Kurdish Language Foundation evolved to include the revitalization and preservation of the Kurdish language, as well as conduct research. A key undertaking of the Foundation involves standardizing and refining the language, which encompasses compiling dictionaries and grammatical books that cover the various Kurdish dialects because the Kurdish language and culture are heterogeneous.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the Foundation is committed to safeguarding and reinvigorating the Kurdish language through initiatives like documenting folklore, translating literary works into Kurdish, and advancing Kurdish literature. In addition to the Foundation's research and protection efforts, they have also made strides in bolstering the use of the Kurdish language in all Autonomous Administration institutions. This includes training employees to write and publish documents in

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<sup>120</sup> Karwan Faïdhi Dri, "Kurdish Language Finally Flourishing in Rojava," *Rûdaw*, November 27, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/ms3xj559>

<sup>121</sup> <https://youtube.com/@szkmedya?si=3WIwMoHGSiuJSOyp>

<sup>122</sup> "Mw' ssa<sup>2</sup> Āllugha<sup>2</sup> Ālkurdiya<sup>2</sup> (SZK) Tuşdr Marj'an Lughwiyan Khas Biqwā'f Āllugha<sup>2</sup> Ālkurdiya<sup>2</sup>," [The Kurdish Language Foundation (SZK) Issues a Linguistic Reference for the Grammar of the Kurdish Language, translation mine - MM], *PYD*, October 25, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/mry59dps>

Kurdish, as well as adopting Kurdish as an official language alongside Arabic and Syriac.<sup>123</sup> The Kurdish Language Institute is looking to expand its reach by establishing teaching offices throughout northeastern Syria, aiding in the language education of Autonomous Administration employees. According to Vîyan Hesên, co-president of SZK, to Rudaw English “many NES employees are not yet proficient in Kurdish, but efforts are being intensified to teach the language to all civil servants. It's worth noting that the majority of employees were previously educated under an Arab system.”<sup>124</sup>

Ms Vîyan Hesên has provided me via WhatsApp with statistics regarding the number of employees who were taught the Kurdish language from 2018 to 2023. These statistics include the level of the course taught and the city where it was provided. Here are the details:<sup>125</sup>

|               | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
|---------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Qamishli      | 2848    | 3287    | 1725    |
| Çil Axa       | 477     | 392     | 232     |
| Al-Dirbasiyah | 2668    | 2217    | 1882    |
| Dêrik         | 4068    | 1650    | 401     |
| Al-Hasakah    | 1513    | 1150    | 1103    |
| Tell Brak     | 164     | 132     | 36      |
| Tall Tamr     | 358     | 287     | 252     |
| Girkêlegê     | 737     | 552     | 479     |
| Tirbespî      | 2475    | 683     | 398     |
| Amuda         | 3151    | 1514    | 973     |

In my efforts to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of the Kurds and the experts on cultural and educational matters in northern Syria, I reached out to Abdulah Şêxo via WhatsApp. Mr. Şêxo, a publisher and translator known for his contributions to the translation of over ten publications into the Kurdish language and his involvement in Kurdish cultural affairs, “emphasized the vital role of the Kurdish Language Foundation. However, he also highlighted the Foundation's shortcomings, including the lack of a long-term strategy and plan, and the limited budget allocated to it by the Autonomous Administration. Despite the Foundation's commendable activities over the past three years, Mr. Şêxo noted that it has been unable to compile a comprehensive Kurdish-Kurdish dictionary, emphasizing the need for long-term institutional efforts and a clear strategy to achieve

<sup>123</sup> “‘Āl’ dāra? Āldhātā?” Tîjh L’tymād “Ālkurdiya?” Lughā? Rsmiya? fy Mu’ssātihā,” [“The Autonomous Administration” is Moving to Adopt “Kurdish” as the Official Language in its Institutions, translation mine - MM], *Sham Network*, October 26, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/y9xbvw8h>

<sup>124</sup> Dri, “Kurdish.”

<sup>125</sup> WhatsApp interview with Vîyan Hesên, Co-president of SZK. April 17, 2024.

this. He emphasized the importance of institutional efforts to safeguard the Kurdish language and culture, regardless of the outcomes of Kurdish military or political endeavors in Syria. He pointed out that the impact on Kurdish language and culture would be long-lasting and challenging to reverse”.<sup>126</sup>

I argue that, the Kurdish Language Foundation has been instrumental in training teachers and staff, and providing courses for the Kurdish population. Through statistical analysis, it is evident that the Foundation has successfully engaged a significant number of Kurds in efforts to enhance the practice of the Kurdish language within the broader community. This has led to significant developments in the linguistic preparation of teachers across various specializations, as well as the training of administration personnel to promote the Kurdish language as an official language alongside Arabic and Syriac within government institutions, marking a historic milestone in modern Syrian history. Despite facing challenges, the Foundation has also focused on institutional research, translation efforts, scientific research, and the compilation of dictionaries and dialects to further develop the Kurdish language. These collective endeavors underscore the foundation's commitment to promoting Kurdish language and culture by actively engaging the Kurdish community.

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<sup>126</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Abdulah Şêxo, a Publisher and Translator. June 08, 2024.



## Chapter 5: Vacuum

The Syrian regime strategically ceded control of northern Syria to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in order to focus on combatting its primary opponent, the Free Syrian Army.<sup>127</sup> In turn, the PYD refrained from participating in the anti-Syrian regime protests, influenced by strategic calculations shaped by the oppressive history of the Syrian regime and complex regional dynamics involving Turkey, the United States, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).<sup>128</sup> However, the division between the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition and the Autonomous Administration deteriorated. Recently, Amer Al-Bou Salama, the general observer of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, “expressed his disbelief to Al-Jazeera Net about the success of the revolution with the Syrian Democratic Forces controlling northeastern Syria, attributing the Syrian revolution's failure to the presence of the Syrian Democratic Forces”.<sup>129</sup> Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's insistence on establishing a safe zone along the Turkish border,<sup>130</sup> coupled with Turkish pressure, added further complexity. As a result, the Autonomous Administration had to reassess their priorities and approaches to safeguarding their interests in the region.

As a result of a strategic calculations, a vacuum emerged in the Kurdish region, and the educational institutions associated with both the regime and the opposition were absent. The Autonomous Administration capitalized on the political and strategic vacuum left by the Syrian regime's withdrawal, utilizing the existing intact institutions. Instead of the repressive regime of the Syrian government, the Autonomous Administration established its own system of governance and implemented associated laws and regulations, including those related to education.<sup>131</sup> This power shift led to radical democracy the governance of northeastern Syria, as demonstrated by the revolutionary literature of the Autonomous Administration. Their model aims to cultivate a society in which citizens are not just subjects of the state, but active participants in a liberated and democratic community.<sup>132</sup> Consequently, this fostered a new perspective and mindset, prompting a renewed emphasis on nurturing the Syrian Kurdish identity, leading to strengthening of the Kurdish language

<sup>127</sup> Anders Nordhag, “Exploring Peace in the Midst of War: Rojava as a Zone of Peace?,” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*(1), Vol. 16 (2020): 14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316620949838>

<sup>128</sup> Nawzad Abdullallah Shukri, “Inconsistency in the US Foreign Policy Towards Syrian Kurdistan,” *Twejer*(1), 4 (2021): 459-502. <https://doi.org/10.31918/twejer.2141.11>

<sup>129</sup> Abdul Rahman Abu Al-Ala, “Ālmrāqb Āl'ām Lil'khwān Ālmuslmyn Bisuwriya<sup>2</sup> Liljazyra<sup>2</sup> Nt: Ālthwra<sup>2</sup> Mustmra<sup>2</sup> Wnad'm ṭwfan Āl'qsa,” [General Controller of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Told Al Jazeera Net: The Revolution Continues and We Support the Al-Aqsa Flood, translation mine - MM], *Al Jazeera Net*, January 02, 2024.

<sup>130</sup> Dominic Evans, “Syria 'Safe Zone' Deadline Expires with Turkish Threat Looming,” *Reuters*, October 1, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey/syria-safe-zone-deadline-expires-with-turkish-threat-looming-idUSKBN1WG3QP/>

<sup>131</sup> Mohammed Al Hessian, Stephanie Bengtsson and Judith Kohlenberger, “Understanding the Syrian Educational System in a Context of Crisis,” *Vienna Institute of Demography Working Papers*, No. 09/2016: 29.

<sup>132</sup> Michael Knapp and Joost Jongerden, “Communal Democracy: the Social Contract and Confederalism in Rojava,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* (1), 10 (2016): 88. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.29642>

and cultural practices. It is worth noting, the fragility of the Syrian state has bolstered the authority of the Autonomous Administration, supporting the Copenhagen School's perspective on the differentiation between state security and societal security. Previously, the dominance of the Syrian state and its centralized system posed a threat to minority cultural and sectarian groups. However, following the weakening and retreat of the Syrian regime after 2011, the strength of the Kurds in northeastern Syria increased.<sup>133</sup>

### Relative Stability and Institutional Successes

The Syrian Democratic Forces have made significant strides in combating ISIS, leading to greater stability in the region. However, achieving lasting stability is both relied on the regime evacuating its control over areas of northeastern Syria and the organizational capacity of the Syrian Democratic Forces. The latter is bolstered by the SDF's internal structure, system, and unified leadership, which help prevent internal conflict. Opposition areas, on the other hand, are divided between extremist Islamic factions, such as Al-Nusra Front, and moderate Islamic factions. The headquarters for this opposition is in Istanbul. Even moderate regions face internal strife due to competition between different brigades, which are funded and loyal to various external parties. This was confirmed in a television interview about the Syrian crisis by Hamad bin Jassim, the former Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said, "We quarreled over Syria and the hunt,"<sup>134</sup> indicating that external parties control the various factions within the opposition. Meanwhile, the regime's areas face competition between Russian and Iranian forces.

Due to the ongoing fighting and competition among the military factions in Syria, the effectiveness of the Syrian Interim Government in opposition areas has been reduced. This is supported by Burhan Ghalioun, former head of the opposition Syrian National Council in Istanbul, who left the opposition and wrote a book titled *Self-Disruption: Chronicles of an Unfinished Revolution, Syria 2011-2012*, translation mine -MM. According to Ghalioun, the opposition has become fragmented and the Syrian National Council, as well as the Syrian Interim Government, have been taken over by the Muslim Brotherhood with close ties to Turkey.<sup>135</sup> In contrast, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria is a unified governing body with effective leadership on the ground, as well as the Syrian Democratic Council, which serves as the parliament

<sup>133</sup> Hawre Hasan Hama, "The Securitization and De-securitization of Kurdish Societal Security in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria," *World Affairs* (4), 183 (2020): 299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0043820020962772>

<sup>134</sup> An Interview with Former Qatari Foreign Minister Hamad Bin Jassim with a TV Channel. <https://youtu.be/GXF6t6lJFrw?si=pFs0UK6NqDP9Z7z3>

<sup>135</sup> Burhan Ghalioun, *'tb Āldhāt: Wqā' thwra<sup>2</sup> Lm Tktml, Suwriya<sup>2</sup> 2011-2012* [Self-Disruption: Chronicles of an Unfinished Revolution, Syria 2011-2012, translation mine - MM] (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2019). 283- 294.

of northeastern Syria. Recently, the Autonomous Administration announced a new social contract that aims to restructure the government of North and East Syria.<sup>136</sup>

It is worth noting that the Democratic Union Party has been cognizant importance of the stability since the onset of the civil war. Consequently, the party has taken measured steps to establish the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Internal Security Forces. These two forces have served as guarantors of stability across various institutions, such as the Education Authority. This is particularly important as internal security and the absence of conflict are crucial factors that influence parents' willingness to enroll their children in schools. Instead, the Education Authority focused on empowering its schools and teaching programs, recognizing the vital contribution education can make towards reconstructing the region and maintaining stability. It's possible that the Education Authority also prioritized promoting ideological stability, as evidenced by its implementation of the “democratic nation” philosophy within the region. Additionally, the authority demonstrated some level of affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party by periodically conducting campaigns and marches in support of the PKK.<sup>137</sup>

In order to gain a better understanding of the organizational structure of the Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, I contacted Ferîde Seîd İbrahîm via WhatsApp, the responsible authority for the relations office of the Education Authority in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria again. In the course of our conversation, I was informed that the Executive Council consists of 33 offices, departments, and authorities, which are outlined as follows:<sup>138</sup>

|   | Arabic                | Kurdish                    | English                           |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | مكتب الاستشارية       | Ofîsa Şêwirmendiyê         | Consulting Office                 |
| 2 | مكتب الاتصالات        | Ofîsa Ragihandinê          | Communications Office             |
| 3 | مكتب الشؤون العامة    | Ofîsa Karûbarên Giştî      | Office of Public Affairs          |
| 4 | مكتب الدراسات         | Ofîsa Lêkolînan            | Studies Office                    |
| 5 | مكتب المالي           | Ofîsa Darayî               | Finance Office                    |
| 6 | مكتب الخدمات الإدارية | Ofîsa Xizmetên Îdarî       | Administrative Services Office    |
| 7 | والتأهيل التدريب مكتب | Ofîsa Perwerdehiya Îdarî û | Office of Administrative Training |

<sup>136</sup> “‘qd Ājtmā’y Jdyd Yfsh Ālmjāl L’ ‘āda² Hykla² Āl’ dāra² Ālzātya² Ālkurdiya²,” [A New Social Contract Makes Way for the Restructuring of Kurdish Autonomous Administration, translation mine - MM], *Alarab*, December 14, 2023.

<sup>137</sup> “Ljān Āl’hyā’ fy “qsd” Tfrud ’tāwāt ’lā Skān Ālhskā² Ld’m “PKK”,” [SDF Neighborhood Committees Impose Royalties on Hasakah Residents to Support PKK, translation mine - MM], *Syria TV*, April 4, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/yy3kj39k>

<sup>138</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Ferîde Seîd İbrahîm, Responsible Authority for the Relations Office of the Education Authority in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. May 18, 2024.

|    | الإداري                                 | Hîndarî                                       | and Qualification                                    |
|----|---|---|--|
| 8  | العام السجل مكتب                        | Ofisa Tomara Giştî                            | Public Registry Office                               |
| 9  | جهاز الرقابة العامة                     | Dezgeha Çavdêriya Giştî                       | Public Oversight Agency                              |
| 10 | الإدارة العامة للنفط<br>والمحروقات      | Rêveberiya Giştî ya Petrol û<br>Hîdrokarbonan | General Administration of Oil and<br>Hydrocarbons    |
| 11 | دائرة الاعلام                           | Dezgeha Medya                                 | Media Department                                     |
| 12 | دائرة شؤون المنظمات                     | Dezgeha Karûbarên Rêxistin                    | Department of Organizations<br>Affairs               |
| 13 | دائرة العلاقات الخارجية                 | Dezgeha Têkiliyên Derve                       | Department of Foreign Relations                      |
| 14 | دائرة المشاريع المجتمعية<br>والتعاونيات | Dezgeha Projeyên Civakî û<br>Kooperatîfan     | Department of Community Projects<br>and Cooperatives |
| 15 | للتخطيط العامة الإدارة<br>والاحصاء      | Rêveberiya Giştî ya Plansaziyê û<br>Amar      | General Administration of Planning<br>and Statistics |
| 16 | للسدود العامة الإدارة                   | Rêveberiya Giştî ya Bendavan                  | General Administration of Dams                       |
| 17 | الإدارة العامة للمعابر                  | Rêveberiya Giştî ya Xaçerêyan                 | General Administration of<br>Crossings               |
| 18 | مؤتمر الإسلام<br>الديمقراطي             | Konferansa Îslama Demokratîk                  | Democratic Islam Conference                          |
| 19 | هيئة المالية                            | Desthilata Darayî                             | Finance Authority                                    |
| 20 | هيئة الداخلية                           | Rêveberiya Navxweyî                           | Interior Authority                                   |
| 21 | هيئة الدفاع                             | Desteya Parastinê                             | Defense Authority                                    |
| 22 | هيئة الإدارات المحلية                   | Desthilata Rêveberiya Herêmî                  | Local Government Authority                           |
| 23 | هيئة البيئة                             | Ajansa Jîngehê                                | Environment Agency                                   |
| 24 | هيئة الصحة                              | Desteya Tenduristiyê                          | Health Authority                                     |
| 25 | هيئة شؤون الاجتماعية<br>والكادحين       | Desteya Karûbarên Civakî û<br>Karkeran        | Authority for Social Affairs and<br>Workers          |
| 26 | هيئة المرأة                             | Rêveberiya Jinan                              | Women Authority                                      |
| 27 | هيئة الثقافة                            | Rêveberiya Çandê                              | Culture Authority                                    |
| 28 | هيئة التربية                            | Rêveberiya Perwerdehiyê                       | Education Authority                                  |
| 29 | هيئة الزراعة والري                      | Rêveberiya Çandinî û Avdaniyê                 | Agriculture and Irrigation Authority                 |
| 30 | هيئة الاقتصاد                           | Rêveberiya Aborî                              | Economics Authority                                  |
| 31 | هيئة الحقوق والعدل                      | Komîsyona Maf û Edaletê                       | Commission for Rights and Justice                    |
| 32 | هيئة الطاقة                             | Desthilata Enerjiyê                           | Energy Authority                                     |

|    |                      |                         |                            |
|----|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 33 | هيئة الشباب والرياضة | Desteya Ciwan û Werzîşê | Youth and Sports Authority |
|----|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|

In my efforts to gain a deeper understanding of the Education Authority, including its organizational structure and operational processes, I sought clarification from Ferîde Ibrahîm during our recent WhatsApp call. She provided insights into the following aspects:<sup>139</sup>

The *Desteya Perwerdehiyê ya bakûr û Rojhelata Sûrî* "Education Authority of North and East Syria" supervises the following institutions that are affiliated with it:

1. *Akedemîya Mamûstan* "Teachers Academy".
2. *Akedemîya Mamûstan yan Biranşan* "Teachers Academy for Scientific Specializations".
3. *Akedemîya Navendî ya Lêkûlînên Istîratîcî* "Central Academy of Strategic Studies".
4. *Peymangiha Avakirina Mamûstan* "Teacher Training Institute".
5. *Sazîya Minhacan* "Curriculum Foundation".
6. *Sazîya Zimanê Kurdî (SZK)* "Kurdish Language Foundation".
7. *Sazîya Oliftaw* "Syriac Language Foundation".

It also supervises the Education Authority in the cantons, which are as follows:

1. *Rêveberiya Perwerdehiyê li Canona Cizîrê* "Al-Jazeera Canton Education Authority".
2. *Rêveberiya Perwerdehiyê li Canona Firatê* "Euphrates Canton Education Authority".
3. *Rêveberiya Perwerdehiyê li Canona Efrînê* "Afrin Canton Education Authority".
4. *Rêveberiya Perwerdehiyê li Canona Menbic* "Manbij Canton Education Authority".
5. *Rêveberiya Perwerdehiyê li Canona Tebqa* "Al-Tabqah Canton Education Authority".
6. *Rêveberiya Perwerdehiyê li Canona Reqa* "Raqqa Canton Education Authority".
7. *Rêveberiya Perwerdehiyê li Canona Dêrizor* "Deir ez-Zor Canton Education Authority".

The Education Authority in each canton is also divided into several *Rêveberiya Dibistana* "Schools Authority" according to the cities in the canton.

To gain further insight into the operations of the Kurdish Language Foundation (SZK), it is one of the seven institutions and academies affiliated with the Educational Authority, I reached out to Vîyan Hesên, Co-president of SZK, once more via WhatsApp. She graciously shared with me a comprehensive list of Kurdish language institutions located in the cities and towns within the northeastern region of Syria. These institutions are as follows:<sup>140</sup>

<sup>139</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Ferîde Seîd Ibrahîm.

<sup>140</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Vîyan Hesên, Co-president of SZK. May 18, 2024.

|                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Navenda Giştî "General Headquarters" | 1  |
| Al-Hasakah                           | 1  |
| Kobani                               | 1  |
| Al-Tabqah                            | 1  |
| Manbij                               | 1  |
| Qamishli                             | 4  |
| Tirbespi                             | 1  |
| Girkêlegê                            | 1  |
| Dêrik                                | 1  |
| Al-Dirbasiyah                        | 1  |
| Til Hemîs                            | 1  |
| Çil Axa                              | 1  |
| Amuda                                | 1  |
| Tell Brak                            | 1  |
| Til Koçer                            | 1  |
| Tall Temr                            | 1  |
| Al-Shahba Camps                      | 1  |
| Aleppo                               | 1  |
| Total                                | 21 |

In the context of this institutional organization, particularly the endeavors to revitalize the educational framework, I can juxtapose the statistics and data I have gathered with the content of Hiba Abou Khashabha's master's thesis entitled “*A Comparison Study: Different Parties, Different Ideologies, Different Educational Systems: The War and Its Effects on Schooling in Syria*”. “In general, it can be said that the quality of educational personnel in the Kurdish region is good and better compared to the opposition-controlled areas. This can be explained by two main points. First, according to the interviewees, the ability of the Self Administration to build a complete educational system, subject to clear governance mechanisms, supports teacher quality. This was reflected in the process of selecting staff more effectively than in opposition-controlled areas, for example. Many teachers confirmed that they are also subject to monitoring and technical processes. This was done by forming a system of specialists whose task is to support teachers. The second point is related to the continuous capacity-building programs provided by the educational bodies of the Self-Administration to teachers. This training contributed to improving the performance level of staff.

Many teachers confirmed that they received many trainings about the curricula and teaching method.”<sup>141</sup>

In summary, upon reviewing the governance system implemented by the Autonomous Administration and the internal structure of its institutions, it becomes evident that it has been effective within the context of the Syrian conflict. This comprehensive institutional framework also encompasses the Education Authority, which has established seven academies and institutions focused on improving the skills of educators. Furthermore, Kurdish language institutions have been disseminated across all Kurdish cities in northern Syria. The Autonomous Administration not only took advantage of the power vacuum created by the regime's withdrawal but also addressed the deliberate negligence of the Kurdish region by the Syrian regime in terms of establishing educational facilities. These initiatives have fostered greater trust in the Autonomous Administration and its new governance system, despite the challenges, and have encouraged people to engage with it, thereby contributing to the preservation and promotion of Kurdish culture.

### **Redefining Citizenship and Power Dynamics**

The relative success of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, particularly the Education Authority, can be attributed to an amalgamation of factors. The vacuum and internal stability in the northeastern regions of Syria played a crucial role in enabling the institutions to thrive. In addition, the American intervention in October 2014 to fight ISIS in Kobani,<sup>142</sup> as part of a larger geopolitical strategy, shifted the balance of power in the Middle East.<sup>143</sup> This intervention led to the restructuring of governance structures and the creation of new systems to cater to the evolving needs of the population, including the Education Authority. The Western and American support, in particular, as highlighted in the International Crisis Group report “Promoting Fragile Recovery,” provided the necessary resources and operational expenses for the Autonomous Administration to manage its institutions and achieve its success.<sup>144</sup>

Changes in power dynamics and the redefinition of citizenship were not solely achieved through military intervention. In fact, institutions were also fortified by means of financial assistance. It is worth noting that this aid, coupled with the oil wealth of northeastern Syria, has played a significant role in the Education Authority's ability to impose its curricula. It is important to mention that this imposition of schools occurred after the American intervention and was

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<sup>141</sup> Khashabha, “A Comparison Study,” 32-33.

<sup>142</sup> “Syrian Rebels Join Battle to Protect Kobane,” *AlJazeera*, October 29, 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Maeala Muhammad Lotfy Mahmoud Ibrahim Salem, “Āltdkhl Ālrwsy fy Suwriya<sup>2</sup>: Āldwāf Walmalat,” [Russian Intervention in Syria: Motives and Consequences, translation mine - MM], *Scientific Journal of the College of Economic Studies and Political Sciences* (14), (2022): 7: 387-452. <https://doi.org/10.21608/esalexu.2022.247210>

<sup>144</sup> “Syria: Shoring Up.”

accompanied by the funding of Kurdish language research centers, such as the Kurdish Language Foundation SZK, and the creation of new school curricula. Furthermore, this aid also facilitated the payment of salaries to a large number of teachers.

The specific amount of financial aid allocated to the Autonomous Administration, as well as the sources of oil wealth, remain undisclosed. However, it is evident that American intervention has played a significant role in shaping the attitudes of the Kurdish population towards accepting the institutions of the Autonomous Administration. This influence should be understood within the broader context of international involvement in the Syrian conflict. In addition to Iranian and Russian support for the Syrian regime, there has been Turkish and Gulf states intervention in support of the Syrian opposition. The American intervention has notably benefited the Kurds and led to the establishment of bases for the American-led coalition in Kurdish-populated areas, effectively unofficially acknowledging this Autonomous Administration. This intervention has influenced the dynamics shaping the interaction between the Kurdish population and the Education Authority. As previously mentioned, these dynamics of involvement, vacuum and adaptation are interconnected and indivisible, but they are also subject to change. It should be noted that following the American intervention, Turkey conducted two military operations against the Autonomous Administration areas. The first, *Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı* “Operation Olive Branch,” took place on January 20, 2018, resulting in the Afrin canton exiting the Autonomous Administration's control in favor of the Syrian opposition.<sup>145</sup> The second operation, *Barış Pınarı Harekâtı* “Operation Peace Spring,” occurred on October 9, 2019, leading to the area from Tell Abyad to Ras al-Ayn no longer being under the control of the Autonomous Administration.<sup>146</sup> The ongoing presence of American bases in Kurdish population areas continues to serve as a stabilizing factor in the Kurdish region, especially compared to other international interventions in the Syrian civil war on behalf of the warring parties, although the impact of the American intervention on behalf of the Autonomous Administration is not effective compared to the period of fighting ISIS.

The fast-paced changes resulting from the Syrian conflict have reshaped power dynamics and the concept of citizenship outside of traditional state paradigms. The Autonomous Administration's relatively successful institution building within the context of the Syrian Civil War has influenced the overall outlook of the Kurdish population in Syria. Consequently, this has bolstered the Syrian Kurds' trust in the various institutions of the Autonomous Administration, such as the Education Authority, thereby aiding the development and progression of Kurdish cultural customs in

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<sup>145</sup> “Operation Olive Branch Launched in Syria's Afrin to Clear PKK, Daesh, Turkish Military Says,” *Daily Sabah*, 20 January 2018.

<sup>146</sup> Bethan McKernan, “Turkey Unleashes Airstrikes Against Kurds in North-East Syria,” *The Guardian*, October 9, 2019.

northeastern Syria. It's important to note that while these dynamics effectively support Kurdish culture and practices, they can be subject to change. Such fluctuations encompass the uncertainties related to the presence of the United States in Kurdish regions and the truncation of parts of the Autonomous Administration areas due to Turkish interventions.



## Chapter 6: Adaptation

In the course of discussing involvement and vacuum, two important themes that have played a significant role in facilitating the acceptance and adaptation of individuals to Education Authority affiliated with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, an enhancement of the practice of Kurdish identity and culture. However, it is important to note that this adaptation can not be solely attributed to these two factors. Rather, the marginalization of Kurdish culture throughout history has also played a crucial role, and the Education Authority's efforts to lift this ban on their culture have been instrumental in the adaptation of the Kurdish population to the Education Authority. After I obtained sufficient knowledge through involvement and vacuum, I can now proceed to create a distinct chapter on adaptation and include an additional significant reason for adaptation: the ability to publicly and effectively practice Kurdish's culture, which had previously been forbidden through new school curricula that highlight Kurdish culture and history. This endeavor is closely tied to illuminating the dynamics of interaction between the Kurdish community and the educational system, resulting in greater opportunities for the Kurdish population to engage in their cultural practices. As such, I have organized these factors and reasons in a coherent and logical manner for clarity and accuracy.

### School Curricula as Resistance

Throughout its history, successive Syrian governments, including the Baath government, have imposed numerous restrictions and repressive measures on the Kurdish language.<sup>147</sup> The government's policies aimed at assimilating the Kurds into the Arab identity have necessitated that Kurdish students study in Arabic,<sup>148</sup> with no option to learn to read and write in their own language. Additionally, the regime's severe repression of any opposition<sup>149</sup> has exacerbated existing social divisions, leading to increased feelings of marginalization and discrimination among the Kurdish population. The persistent denial of Kurdish cultural and educational freedoms by successive Syrian governments<sup>150</sup> has instilled a deep longing within the Kurdish community to foster their distinct identity and culture in a nurturing milieu. This yearning has manifested itself through the Kurdish population's engagement in political parties advocating for the cultural rights of the Kurdish people

<sup>147</sup> Hawre Hasan Hama, "The Securitization and De-securitization", 303.

<sup>148</sup> Katrin Lindner, Kathleen Hipfner-Boucher, Anna Cavaco Yamashita, Claudia Maria Riehl, Mohcine Ait Ramdan, and Xi Chen, "Acculturation Through the Lens of Language: Syrian Refugees in Canada and Germany," *Applied Psycholinguistics*(6), Vol.41 (2020): 27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0142716420000454>

<sup>149</sup> Alexandra Hartman, Benjamin Morse, and Sigrid Weber, "Violence, Displacement, and Support for Internally Displaced Persons: Evidence from Syria," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*(10), 65 (2021): 1814. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027211011523>

<sup>150</sup> Loqman Radpey, "Kurdish Regional Self-rule Administration in Syria: a New Model of Dstatehood and its Status in International Law Compared to the Kurdistan Regional Government (krq) in Iraq," *Japanese Journal of Political Science*(3), 17 (2016): 472. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1468109916000190>

in Syria.<sup>151</sup> Despite enduring marginalization, the Kurds capitalized on the collapse of the social contract during the Syrian Civil War and established institutions that would safeguard their self-rule.<sup>152</sup>

As a result, self-managed educational programs and institutions have emerged in the region, empowering the community to progress independently. The Education Authority of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has made a significant achievement by developing school curricula that encompass vital historical knowledge concerning the injustices suffered by the Kurdish population in Syria. Consequently, Chapter 1 has been included at the outset of the thesis as the new educational curricula were a response to the Kurds' demands for cultural rights. Education represents the outcome of their enduring struggle from the time of the French mandate over Syria until the period preceding the Syrian conflict in 2011. Hence, the Kurds' natural readiness resulting from their protracted struggle experiences can be viewed as the foundational aspects of this adaptation, whereas involvement, vacuum and adaptation are dynamics that surfaced following the Syrian conflict and substantially contribute to the Kurds' interaction and adjustment within the educational landscape. It is important to note that this research focuses specifically on Kurdish cultural practices. Thus, I will abstain from discussing Autonomous Administration curricula designed for other languages such as Arabic and Syriac, and I will not delve into Autonomous Administration ideologies within school curricula, as it is beyond the scope of this research. Additionally, I will not analyze subjects and scientific disciplines like mathematics, chemistry, and science, as I lack the expertise to evaluate scientific textbooks.

Efforts to create the school curricula for primary and secondary education date back to the early stages of the Syrian Civil War in 2012, followed by another revision in 2019. Recently, the *Sazîya Minhacan* "Curriculum Foundation," affiliated with the Education Authority, announced its intention to introduce further changes to the school curricula.<sup>153</sup> This process of curriculum adjustment has been gradual. Upon reviewing some secondary school textbooks, it is evident that they address the historical injustices faced by the Kurds in Syria. These textbooks are presented in the Kurdish language, which had been prohibited for Kurds to learn during Syria's modern history. Additionally, they provide comprehensive coverage of Kurdish literature and history, as well as schoolbook on Kurdish folk traditions. Here are some examples from secondary school textbooks:

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<sup>151</sup> Hussain Zaidou, "Kurdish Cultural Freedoms are Possible in Syria—But Not Political Autonomy," *The Washington Institute*, August 16, 2018.

<sup>152</sup> Lucas Swinnen, "The Syrian Civil War: A Never-Ending Story," *IFF Paper Online No33*, (2023): 7. <https://doi.org/10.51363/unifr.diff.2022.33>

<sup>153</sup> "Mu'ssa<sup>2</sup> Ālmnāhj Bîşdd Tghyyr Ālmnāhj Āldrāsiya<sup>2</sup> fy 'qlym Shmāl Wshrq Suwriyā," [The Curriculum Foundation is in the Process of Changing the School Curricula in the Northern and Eastern Region of Syria, translation mine - MM], *Ronahi*, May 31, 2024.

The schoolbook “Folk Beliefs” for the secondary school stage played a crucial role in reviving the beliefs of the ancient peoples who inhabited the region and based their way of life on the teachings of Zoroaster. Furthermore, the schoolbook of “Religions” included the Yazidi religion alongside Islam and Christianity, aiming to foster inclusivity and participation among diverse ethnic and religious groups. This comprehensive approach to religious education marks a significant development,<sup>154</sup> particularly for the Yazidi population, who have previously faced restrictions.<sup>155</sup> This effort has contributed to greater recognition and appreciation of both the religious and ethnic diversity in the region.

The schoolbook known as “History” delves into the rich history of the region and highlights the role of the Kurdish community within it.<sup>156</sup> The “Ecology” schoolbook has also been well-received, as it places importance on preserving ecosystems.<sup>157</sup><sup>158</sup> The Education Authority has taken significant strides towards promoting gender equality, including the development of a secondary level schoolbook of “Genology.”<sup>159</sup> This curriculum aims to spread awareness about gender concepts, counter extremist ideas, and challenge patriarchal systems.<sup>160</sup> As part of a broader effort to update school curricula, the previous “Nationalism” schoolbook, which solely focused on Arab nationalism and Baath Party ideologies, has been replaced by a “Democratic Nation” schoolbook that questions the concept of nation-states and Islamism while acknowledging cultural differences.<sup>161</sup> In a groundbreaking move for education in Syria, the geography of Kurdistan is now featured in the “Geography” schoolbook, marking the first time this region has been included. It's worth noting that the mention of Kurdistan was previously considered taboo. Furthermore, the schoolbook *Çand û Sinc* “Culture and Ethics” now emphasizes the appreciation of nature and the importance of respecting religious and cultural diversity.<sup>162</sup>

<sup>154</sup> Sidar Rashid, “Ālt’lym fy Shmāl Wshrq Suwriyā .. ‘āmūn min Ālthdyāt Wāl’njāzāt,” [Education in North and East Syria... A Year of Challenges and Achievements, translation mine - MM], *Ronahi*, December 25, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/46a7wm32>

<sup>155</sup> “Fy Ms’ā Lthqīq Ālhriyā² Āldynya² .. Āl’ dāra² Āldhātua² Tu’d Ktb Ālrbayā² Lkl Dyāna²,” [In an Effort to Achieve Religious Freedom...The Autonomous Administration Prepares Religious Education Books for Each Religion, translation mine - MM], *Ronahi*, July 31, 2022.

<sup>156</sup> “Dîrok , Navîn 2” [Schoolbook, History, Secondary 2, translation mine - MM], 2019-2020.

<sup>157</sup> “Îkolojî , Navîn 1” [Schoolbook, Ecology, Secondary 1, translation mine - MM], 2019-2020.

<sup>158</sup> Muhammad Hammoud, “‘brz ‘māl Hy’a² Ālby’a² L’qlym Shmāl Wshrq Suwriyā² 2023 Wkhtthā L’ām 2024,” [The Most Prominent Work of the Environment Agency for the North and East Syria Region 2023 and its Plans for 2024, translation mine - MM], *Ronahi*, December 25, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/576bb36r>

<sup>159</sup> “Jineolojî , Navîn 3” [Schoolbook, Genealogy, Secondary 3, translation mine - MM], 2019-2020.

<sup>160</sup> “‘Jnwlwjiyā’ ‘w ‘lm Ālmr’a² .. Mnhj Yhdf Lnshr Ālmfāhim Āljndrya² fy Shmāl Shrqy Suwriyā²,” [“Ginology” or Women’s Science...a Curriculum that Aims to Spread Gender Concepts in Northeastern Syria, translation mine - MM], *North Press Agency*, September 27, 2022. <https://npasyria.com/123852/>

<sup>161</sup> Daria Ahmed, “Mnhāj “Kurdy Jdyd” fy Mnātq Ālshmāl Ālshrqy Ālswry,” [A “New Kurdish” Curriculum in the Northeastern Syrian Regions, translation mine - MM], *MMC News*, July 16, 2020.

<sup>162</sup> Hussein Al-Khatib, “‘n Fwḏā Ālmmāhj Ālt’lymiyā² fy Suwriyā²,” [About the Chaos of Educational Curricula in Syria, translation mine - MM], *Noonpost*, December 20, 2012.

In order to keep track of the social, political, and educational changes taking place in northeastern Syria, I employed a sensory methodology. This involved engaging in discussions with a diverse cross-section of Kurdish society, including a prominent member of the General Council of the Democratic Union Party, Mr. Bekir Hec Îssa via WhatsApp. During our conversation, Mr. Îssa “emphasized the crucial role that effective educational institutions play in meeting the needs of society. He articulated the importance of establishing a connection between the Autonomous Administration bodies, particularly the Educational Authority, and the cultural attributes of the Kurdish population in the Kurdish areas, as well as addressing the pertinent issues prevalent in that region. According to Mr. Issa, the new generation of students who complete their studies in these institutions will be equipped to address the region's challenges and find solutions to its problems.”<sup>163</sup> It has become evident that there is a noticeable trend in institutions and society at large to reinforce the Kurdish language, culture, and identity. This has resulted in a considerable growth in the number of Kurds practicing their cultural heritage. In particular, it should be noted that educational and cultural programs in regions previously inhabited by Kurds were primarily conducted in Arabic and were not designed to reflect or promote Kurdish culture and identity. Rather, they were intended to assimilate the Kurds into the dominant Baathist Arab identity.

The “Culture and Ethics” textbook, as well as most of the other textbooks I showcased, were not previously included in the school curriculum in Syria. This led me to have a separate conversation with the teacher, Abdulah Selahdîn, via WhatsApp. He teaches this subject to secondary school students along with the Kurdish language. I wanted to understand the direction in which the curriculum is heading. “He explained that in his view, this textbook is a continuation of the “Social Sciences” and “Life and Society” textbooks. It focuses on cultural, religious, and ethnic differences in the region, as well as the study of moral standards in ancient philosophies, religions, and popular sects. Additionally, it delves into the relationship with nature, aiming for a balanced and equal life.”<sup>164</sup>

In light of discussions with a group of Kurdish residents and a thorough review of textbooks, I argue that these textbooks encompass two key elements. Firstly, the textbooks espouse the ideology of the “democratic nation” advocated by the Autonomous Administration. This is evident in the content which addresses cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity in the region, while also promoting principles of women's liberation and environmental awareness. These educational efforts align with the overarching goal of nation-building endorsed by the Autonomous Administration, as highlighted

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<sup>163</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Mr. Bekir Hec Îssa, a Member of the Democratic Union Party's General Council. April 20, 2023.

<sup>164</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Abdulah Selahdîn.

by Sean Lee in his chapter titled, “The Evolution of Rojava: Tensions between Democratic Confederalism and State-Building in Northern Syria,” where he discusses the tools employed by the Autonomous Administration in nation-building, including war, education, and maps.<sup>165</sup> Secondly, the curricula prominently feature Kurdish history and its significant contributions to the wider civilization of the Middle East. Furthermore, they shed light on the historical injustices suffered by the Kurdish population. Rather than dwelling solely on the injustices, the curricula emphasize Kurdish cultural traits and seek to foster a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by the Kurdish community, with the aim of addressing the region's multifaceted issues. These educational initiatives are a continuation of the PKK's legacy, which has historically been instrumental in advancing Kurdish cultural endeavors. Consequently, the deliberate efforts of the Education Authorities to promote and preserve Kurdish culture, alongside the appeal of the principles and philosophy of the democratic nation, have fostered engagement of the Kurdish populace with the education system.

Adaptation is not solely tied to historical injustices, but extends to current injustices as well. These injustices are apparent in the form of extremist Islamic movements like ISIS and in Turkish's attacks on the Kurdish region. In the face of these threats, adherence to Kurdish heritage and culture has become a part of the resistance, and the Autonomous Administration has worked to reinforce these values, leading to the Kurdish community aligning with the Autonomous Administration and resisting extremism. The strengthening of these values by the Autonomous Administration is related to the two opposing projects that both the Administration and Islamic movements are working to implement in areas outside of the Syrian regime's authority. The Administration presents a project of democratic confederation in contrast to ISIS's caliphate project, emphasizing different visions of governance and societal organization.<sup>166</sup> Through the incorporation of democratic values, gender equality, tolerance for diverse religions, and autonomy into their educational curricula,<sup>167</sup> the Autonomous Administration aims to instill values that conflict with the narratives of Islamic movements.

The resistance encountered by Islamic movements in Syria was not exclusive to extremist groups. Moderate movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which upholds Islamic principles

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<sup>165</sup> Sean Lee, “The Evolution of Rojava: Tensions between Democratic Confederalism and State-Building in Northern Syria,” in *The Kurds in the Middle East: Enduring Problems and New Dynamics*, ed. Mehmet Gurses, David Romano, and Michael M. Gunter (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), p.85-87.

<sup>166</sup> Daniele Molteni, “Governance Ribelle: Califfato e Confederalismo Democratico Nella Guerra Civile Siriana,” [Rebel Governance: Caliphate and Democratic Confederalism in the Syrian Civil War, translation mine - MM], *Nuovi Autoritarismi E Democrazie: Diritto, Istituzioni, Società* (NAD-DIS)(2), 5. (2023):176-78. <https://doi.org/10.54103/2612-6672/22172>

<sup>167</sup> Rosa Burç, “Non-Territorial Autonomy and Gender Equality: The Case of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria - Rojava,” *Filozofija I Drustvo*(3), (2020); 31: 319. <https://doi.org/10.2298/fid2003319b>

and laws for management, also faced opposition. Efforts to establish a state governed by Islamic Sharia are clearly evident in the political agendas of the Syrian opposition. Without delving into details, educational institutions in opposition-held areas have actively reinforced the principles of Islamic Sharia. In addition to the existing “Religion” schoolbook taught in primary and secondary schools under the Syrian regime, a new schoolbook titled “The Biography of the Prophet”<sup>168</sup> has been introduced to advocate for Islamic law and encourage the adoption of Islam as a system of governance. For the Kurdish population, the Arab opposition's Islamic stance is at odds with their popular religious practices. Additionally, there is a concern that the Syrian opposition may prioritize Islamic narratives over the demands of the Kurdish people, especially given the Muslim Brotherhood's growing influence in the opposition. Burhan Ghalioun, former head of the opposition Syrian National Council in Istanbul, highlights this sentiment in his book, *Self-Disruption: Chronicles of an Unfinished Revolution, Syria 2011-2012*, translation mine - MM.<sup>169</sup> This confirms that these fears are not unique to the Kurdish community.

It is worth noting that the Islamic movements did not play a significant role in the recent history of the Kurdish community in Syria. This can be attributed to the historical development of Kurdish identity and cross-border influences. On the other hand, many Kurds were drawn to Kurdish political parties as they were supporters of the cultural rights of the Kurdish people. This legacy can be traced back to the Mandate period and the period of independence, when the first Syrian Kurdish party was established alongside the Baath Party. Additionally, the Kurdish political movement in Syria was influenced by the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey, which had its origins in communist and anti-colonial ideologies before shifting towards a stronger emphasis on nationalism.<sup>170</sup> During an interview with Syria Channel, Dr. Abdulbaset Sieda, who served as President of the Syrian National Council (June 10, 2012, - November 9, 2012), “emphasized that Islam did not become phenomenon in the Kurdish-populated areas of modern Syria. He attributed this to the influence of Kurdish political parties and communist parties in those regions.” Dr. Sieda, who hails from the city of Amuda in northern Syria, highlighted the historical factors that have shaped the political landscape in the Kurdish-populated areas.<sup>171</sup>

I acknowledge that Kurdish society has not historically been secular. I also want to emphasize that political Islam did not gain significant traction in Kurdish regions and did not become a prevailing force. Instead, Islam in Kurdish areas has been predominantly of a popular or Sufi nature, as evidenced by the prevalence of the Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya orders among the Kurdish

<sup>168</sup> Al-Khatib, “‘n Fwḍā Ālmnāhj.”

<sup>169</sup> Ghalioun, *ʿib Āldhāt*, 283- 294.

<sup>170</sup> Erel and Acik, “Enacting Intersectional,” 481.

<sup>171</sup> <https://youtu.be/wNOg0Rkw9rU?si=b7tAHKXruxXC8R3e>

population.<sup>172</sup> These spiritual practices distance themselves from political agendas and emphasize spiritual teachings, seamlessly integrating into the cultural and spiritual tapestry of Kurdish societies. I maintain that the social dynamics within Kurdish-populated areas have played a significant role in the acceptance of Autonomous Administration by the Kurds. This acceptance reflects a nuanced interplay between historical and cultural inheritances and modern developments. The Kurds' embrace of the Autonomous Administration, as well as their rejection of the Syrian opposition with Islamic leanings, can be seen as a continuation of the activities of Kurdish political parties, as well as communist parties and forms of popular Islam. Therefore, the implementation of a new educational system in Kurdish-populated areas is not only logical, but also serves to meet the cultural needs and aspirations of the Kurdish people.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the Turkish assaults on the Autonomous Administration areas in northern and eastern Syria have been a significant factor in motivating individuals to adopt educational institutions as a means of resistance. This is not only due to media coverage of Turkey's attacks on the Syrian Democratic Forces,<sup>173</sup> but also because these attacks have resulted in the destruction of infrastructure, civilian casualties, and Turkey's efforts to alter the demographic makeup of Afrin and other regions inhabited by Kurds, which Turkey now controls through the transfer of settlers.<sup>174</sup> During my interview with Bekir Hec Îssa, a member of the General Council of the Democratic Union Party, he confirmed that “the Turkish attacks on the Kurdish regions increase the determination of the people and reinforce their commitment to preserving their governance experience.”<sup>175</sup> As confirmed by Mr. Bekir, it can be argued that the Autonomous Administration is leveraging the Turkish attacks to bolster its standing within the Kurdish community. Additionally, the administration's endeavors to solidify its role as a key proponent of Kurdish culture have resulted in the Kurdish populace adapting to the new educational environment. Even the Kurdish National Council, which opposes the Autonomous Administration and is part of the Syrian opposition in Istanbul, cannot ignore the Turkish attacks on Kurdish areas.<sup>176</sup> This response may stem from

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<sup>172</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *Mullas, Sufis, and Heretics: The Role of Religion in Kurdish Society: Collected Articles*, (Piscataway, NJ, USA: Gorgias Press, 2011), 49-50.

<sup>173</sup> “Türkiyâ: dîrbât Jwya<sup>2</sup> Tsthdf Âlmslîhyn Âl'krâd fy Shmâl Suwriyâ,” [Türkiye: Air Strikes Target Kurdish Militants in Northern Syria, translation mine - MM], *Sky News Arabia*, October 7, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/324j9hbx>

<sup>174</sup> “Âltghyyr Aldymughâfy fy 'fryn Âlmîhîla<sup>2</sup> Mstmr m'Âstqdâm Mustwîtnyn Jdd,” [Demographic Change in Occupied Afrin Continues with the Introduction of New Settlers, translation mine - MM], *PYD*, July 8, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/2s4ffjp4>

<sup>175</sup> WhatsApp interview with Mr. Bekir Hec Îssa.

<sup>176</sup> “Âlmîjls Âlwîtny Âlkurdy Fy Suwriya<sup>2</sup> Yuşdr Tşryhan îhwla Âlhjîmât Âlturkia<sup>2</sup>Âl'khyra<sup>2</sup> 'lâ Mwâq' fy Kurdistan Suwriya<sup>2</sup>,” [The Kurdish National Council in Syria Issues a Statement About the Recent Turkish Attacks on Sites in Syrian Kurdistan, translation mine - MM], *PDK-S*, October 07, 2023.

widespread dissatisfaction among the Kurdish population toward the Turkish attacks, ultimately leading to greater alignment with Autonomous Administration.

To sum up, the Kurdish population's adjustment to the education system in Syria has been shaped by historical injustices and ongoing challenges, in addition to involvement and vacuum. This complex dynamic reflects the interplay between historical and cultural legacies and modern developments. Moreover, the incorporation of Kurdish cultural traditions into new school curricula has significantly contributed to the cultivation of Kurdish cultural identity, leading to an extraordinary level of cultural advancement unprecedented in contemporary Syrian history.



## Conclusion

The early 1920s marked the beginning of the rise of Kurdish national consciousness during the French mandate for Syria. During this time, there was a significant transformation in Kurdish national consciousness, as it started to gain traction across the Kurdish countryside, driven by internal and external factors. Simultaneously, Kurdish culture began to evolve and take on a more organized form through the initiatives of *Xoybûn* and his nationalist advocacy. These efforts culminated in the establishment of *Hawar* magazine, which aimed to advance Kurdish literature. Since then, the Kurdish language has become a crucial symbol of Kurdish cultural values and has gained clarity and prominence. Following Syria's independence, successive Syrian regimes, particularly during the union with Egypt and the Baath era, attempted to suppress Kurdish identity and assimilate Kurds into the overarching Arab identity. Cultural and political activities were prohibited, and education was restricted to the Arabic language. As a result, increased violence and strict security measures led to a shift in Kurdish resistance. This resistance took the form of clandestine clubs and societies, culminating in the establishment of the first Kurdish political party. Alongside underground political activities, there was a concerted community effort to preserve language and traditions through socialization. Despite these efforts, the Kurdish language remained confined to social circles in oral form, with very limited access to written language until 2011, when the situation began to change.

In 2011, Syria became part of the Arab Spring movements, which ultimately escalated into a civil war. This conflict resulted in the division of Syria into three regions, with the People's Protection Forces (YPG) and subsequently the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) gaining control of over 25 percent of the country's territory in the northeast. These significant changes in power dynamics led to the formation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Furthermore, governance structures independent of state authority were solidified, and citizenship was redefined following the intervention by the United States in support of the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces during their conflict against ISIS.

The Autonomous Administration has made deliberate efforts to engage with Kurdish culture, drawing from the legacy of the PKK. Subsequently, it has taken institutional measures such as establishing the Education Authority and bolstering the operations of the Kurdish Language Foundation (SZK), integrating it within the Education Authority. The most significant change has been the creation of its own schools and educational curricula. Factors such as involvement, vacuum, and a adaptation have shaped the broader Kurdish community's interaction with this educational institution, thereby contributing to the evolution of Kurdish identity and culture. It is noteworthy that these factors are interconnected, with one often being both a result of and an extension of the others.

The involvement strategies implemented by the Education Authority resulted in increased interaction with the Kurdish population through the creation of employment opportunities for teachers and stakeholders. Furthermore, the establishment of schools facilitated students involvement in the educational process. Simultaneously, the absence of the Syrian regime in Kurdish areas allowed for relative stability and institutional achievements under the Autonomous Administration. With American intervention, the Kurdish society became more open to the new educational landscape. Additionally, the successful integration of historical Kurdish grievances into the curriculum played a significant role in the community's embrace of the educational system.

The Education Authority, and particularly the Curriculum Foundation and the Kurdish Language Foundation (SZK) affiliated with the Education Authority, have made significant efforts that have resulted in the unprecedented development and promotion of Kurdish culture in Syria's modern history. This surge has not only nurtured the growth of Kurdish language education and educational institutions but has also fostered the advancement of all facets of Kurdish cultural expression. I am capable of providing a comprehensive overview of the significant transformations that have transpired since the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, particularly with regard to the evolution of Kurdish cultural identity and its manifestation, as outlined in this thesis.

First, there has been a significant change in the way Kurds engage with their cultural practices. Once kept secretive and confined to social circles, Kurdish culture is now openly embraced. Recent developments in school policies have made it mandatory to participate in these cultural activities. The integration of traditional Kurdish folk culture into school education was achieved through institutional initiatives, thereby reinforcing the cultural foundation that had been established through socialization.

Second, in Kurdish-populated areas, education was conducted in the Kurdish language, incorporating the traditions, history, and struggles of the Kurdish people into the school curricula. This initiative significantly contributed to fostering a deeper understanding among the Kurdish population regarding their historical background, traditions, and struggles.

Third, universities have been founded with instruction in the Kurdish language, offering specialized academic programs in scientific and literary fields with a focus on Kurdish language and literature. Moreover, these institutions now offer postgraduate studies, which further advance the study and practice of the Kurdish language by fostering research in language, compiling dictionaries, studying grammar and dialects, and promoting translation efforts.

Fourth, the language of all institutions and the official language of northeastern Syria was established as Kurdish, alongside Arabic and Syriac. This initiative was spearheaded by the Kurdish

Language Foundation (SZK), a part of the Education Authority, which provided training for employees in Kurdish-populated areas to develop proficiency in reading and writing in Kurdish. Furthermore, these institutions prioritized the employment of graduates from universities located in regions with Kurdish populations. In a significant milestone for modern Syrian history, institutional services are now being offered in the Kurdish language for the first time. This development signifies a notable advancement in Kurdish culture and language within the region.

Fifth, The growth of Kurdish culture encompassed a wide range of elements, including literature, music, theater, and cinema, as well as advancements in writing and publishing, particularly the publications issued by the Education Authority and the Kurdish Language Foundation.

It should be noted that this transformation occurred as a result of the collaboration between Kurdish language institutions and the Kurdish population. This was rooted in the significance of the Kurdish language as a strong symbol of Kurdish cultural values, which became firmly entrenched and non-negotiable through persistent resistance and struggle. With the Kurdish language being officially recognized in northeastern Syria without limitations, and also adopted as the language of instruction and governance across all institutions, traditional Kurdish practices and cultural values experienced a resurgence and evolution.

After careful consideration, it is evident that the diligent efforts of the Education Authority have led to significant development in Kurdish identity, culture, and customs, especially when compared to the years of suppression and prohibition under previous Syrian Arab regimes. Previously confined to oral tradition and limited social circles, Kurdish culture has now flourished into an open practice that encompasses education, employment, and even serves as an official language for the new regime. The interaction of the Education Authority with Kurdish culture has not only fostered a stronger connection between the Kurdish population and the education system but has also played a pivotal role in the advancement of Kurdish culture and its customs.



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