From Qamishli to Qamishlo: A Trip to Rojava's New Capital

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Brief Analysis

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I had not been to Qamishli for twenty years. As a Ph.D. student at the French Institute for the Near East, I went with two friends in the late 1990s to explore northeast Syria. This journey led us to Raqqa, Deir al-Zour, Hasaka, and Qamishli. Since 1997 I have returned to other Syrian cities on several occasions but did not have the opportunity to go to Rojava. Twenty years ago, I stayed in the venerable Semiramis Hotel. This luxurious Art Deco hotel was built in the 1950s, the ''Golden Age'' of Jazira when Qamishli was the economic center of this rich grain and cotton producing area. The Semiramis welcomed the tradesmen, textile merchants, and millers of Aleppo who came to buy crops, and the restaurant hosted the high society of Qamishli who came to taste French wines and eat filet mignon. The city was mainly Christian, the rural exodus having not yet engulfed Qamishli. The Armenian and Syriac populations had fled Turkey for France after the First World War, and the French installed them in this almost empty region in order to limit the land claims of Mustafa Kemal in northern Syria. The Christians made the desert bloom using the land that was granted to them by the authorities.

The Grapes of Wrath

But when I saw Qamishli in 1997, the golden age had passed. The decadence of the Semiramis, like the city, was no longer. The paint was falling, the chandeliers had disappeared, and tawdry neon had replaced them. The rooms had several single beds, as the majority of the clientele were now laborers who shared rooms. The "Petit Paris" of the 1950s was surrounded by informal settlements. With the rural exodus, the population of the city had multiplied tenfold. Immense suburbs of cookie cutter brick houses stretched as far as the eye could see. This aesthetic contrasted strongly with the clean city center, which resembled, at the time, the central district of Aleppo. Qamishli had a popular market where the rural population worked busily but also shopping streets similar to those of Azyzyeh, the rich Christian quarter of Aleppo. We had dinner in an excellent restaurant which would not have been out of place in Aleppo but only had one bottle of French wine.

The city and the countryside were complete opposites. Outside of Qamishli's "French Square" with its plush buildings and westernized shops, the rest of Qamishli resembled an overgrown, if slightly more modern, village. The

city houses were made of cinderblocks, the roofs were cement, and every house was connected to electricity. In the countryside, the houses had clay walls and straw roofs and most of the hamlets were not on electrical grids. The peasantry in the rest of Syria had received land during the 1960s land reform, with the exception of Qamishli's Hasaka governorate. The state retained the expropriated land and rented it to the former landowners, and in 1970, Hafez al-Assad blocked the distribution of land to avoid creating a small Kurdish landowning class.
The objective was to push the Kurdish population to emigrate to the big Syrian cities where it would be more likely to Arabize. Kurdish irredentism was seen as a potential danger by the Syrian authorities even before the Baathist regime. Under the "liberal" regime in 1961, tens of thousands of Kurds were stripped of their Syrian nationality and became *bidoun* - paperless - in their own country. President Bashar al-Assad promised to grant citizenship to all *bidoun* after the 2004 Kurdish revolt in an attempt to calm the Kurdish population, but only remembered his promise after the uprising in 2011.

There were two categories of *bidoun*: the "whites" and the "reds." The "whites" were allowed to move freely within Hassaka province with their white papers from the village mayors. The "reds" had a permit from Damascus which gave them freedom of movement throughout all of Syria. Both categories were forbidden to own land or buildings. If they acquired real estate, they had to have a sponsor; a lucky Kurdish Syrian national or an Arab friend. The children of the *bidoun* could attend school until the age of eighteen and pass the baccalaureéat, but they did not get a diploma and did not have access to universities – Syrian or otherwise. Kurds with Syrian nationality could move freely but still faced widespread discrimination based on their ethnicity. The 300,000-strong Kurdish *bidoun* population in 2011 was thus in a situation that fueled the protest against the Syrian regime. In the decade preceding the uprising in Syria, the economic and social situation of Jazira was deteriorating. Drought, lack of investment, additional restrictions on construction, and the creation of new businesses made the situation even more explosive than in the rest of Syria.

A Divided City

In March 2017 the Hotel Semiramis became the new Qamishli town hall under the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Today it is under the control of the Syrian army and inaccessible to the PYD. Qamishli is a city divided by three armies: the PYD, the Syrian army, and the Sottoro militias. The PYD controls the majority of the city, while the Syrian army controls the "security square" between the souk and the Turkish border, and the around the airport. The Christian quarter is partly held by the Sottoro, a Christian militia linked to the Syrian regime. Simple pots of flowers block the streets and indicate the boundaries of Sottoro territory. The YPG and the Kurdish police (*assaych*) do not enter the Sottoro-held area in order to avoid any confrontations. In 2016, an attempt by the *assaych* to control the Christian quarter resulted in violent clashes that killed one Sottoro member and eight *assaych*. Civilians, however, can move from one neighborhood to another without difficulty.
The Kurdish forces could easily seize the government-controlled part of the city. However, the government would shut down the airport; a means of communication essential to reach Damascus, Beirut, and other cities abroad, and to receive medicine. Additionally, the Syrian regime would retaliate against the Kurdish enclaves of Afrin and Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo, whose supply passes through government areas. Moreover, the Kurdish military is no longer in favor of hostilities with Damascus. The PYD must, therefore, reach an agreement with Assad for the control of northern Syria. PYD governance should not worry Damascus.

''Communalism'' and Kurdification

The PYD installed a new administrative framework according to the principles laid down by Abdullah Ocalan. Each unit, called a "commune," contains about one thousand people. It is managed by an elected committee of about fifteen people representing the different families that make up the neighborhood or the village. The "commune" must handle the problems of daily life and be the intermediary between individuals and administrations.

Communes draw up lists of the beneficiaries of the distributions of fuel and bread and also have an educational role in organizing courses in Kurdish. For the PYD, communes are the essential element of its territorial network. Each commune bears the name of a martyr, and the walls of the public house are decorated with portraits of Ocalan and numerous martyrs. The commune is supposed to be relatively economically self-sufficient, with some trade between the communes. To this end, it must encourage the creation of a production cooperative with about fifteen workers. Ultimately, the goal is to remove traders and oblige public bartering on a local basis. However, the new authorities do not insist on the economic aspect of the framework because the unification of Rojava and the fight against the Islamic State is the priority and they do not want the population to revolt.

Rojava's new framework favors the working-class and small peasantry to the detriment of the landowners and urban middle class who fear they will be the victims of a revolution. The old cleavages – urban-rural and city-dwellers and neo-city dwellers are becoming concrete divisions. The Christian minority is fiercely opposed to the PYD system, and look forward to the return of the Syrian regime. Half of the Qamishli Christians have already left while the fighting is not touching the city; Christian traders and liberal professionals are fleeing economic stagnation rather than fighting. But the economic sluggishness is causing serious problems for those who have stayed. The Kurdification of the education system will provoke a new wave of departures among Christians and Muslim Arabs who do not conceive of their future in a Kurdish canton. After imposing Kurdish in most public schools, the authorities also want to impose it on private Christian schools starting in September 2017. Public secondary schools will also be forced to teach Kurdish. Thousands of Arab teachers will find themselves unemployed and replaced by Kurdish professors.
Qamishli Becomes Qamishlo

Qamishli is experiencing an advanced Kurdification process. It is hard to know how far the PYD will go in its "cooperative" economic project, but it is likely that it will only serve to reverse the power relations between the Kurds and the Arabs. As a Kurdish intellectual said to me in 2011: ''Kurds have lived as a minority on their territory, Arabs will have to learn to live as a minority in the historical territory of the Kurds if they wish to remain.'' Behind the smoke screen of their egalitarian ideology, the Kurdish national project manifests itself. The PYD tried to disguise it as long as possible to ally the Arab tribes of the area against the Islamic State and to maintain international support. Some will surely argue that the PYD project is revenge for years of oppression under Arab authorities and a measure of social justice for the Kurdish people. However, according to Ibn Khaldun, the PYD political project is just spoliation in favor of a new *assabiyya* (group cohesion). It is also necessary to consider the sectarian factor in the process of ethnopolitical purge since the Kurdish pro-KDP middle class is also a victim. Qamishli becomes Qamishlo, and the Hotel Semiramis, the high place of the "little Paris" of the 1950s, is occupied by the small children of the agricultural proletariat. The former owner, a Syriac Catholic, has fled to Canada, and there is no more French wine.

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