

# The Qamishli Uprising of 2004: Genesis, Events, and Immediate Aftermath (Pre-2010)

## I. Introduction

The events that unfolded in the northeastern Syrian city of Qamishli in March 2004 represent a critical juncture in the modern history of Syria, particularly concerning the state's relationship with its significant Kurdish minority.<sup>1</sup> Known as the Qamishli Uprising or *Serhildan* (uprising in Kurdish), these events constituted an unprecedented wave of Kurdish anti-government mobilization and protest within the country.<sup>1</sup> The scale and intensity of the demonstrations reportedly surprised the Syrian government and brought the long-simmering grievances of the Kurdish population sharply into focus, both domestically and internationally.<sup>1</sup> This report examines the Qamishli Uprising, focusing strictly on the period up to the end of 2009. It delves into the historical context of discrimination that fueled the unrest, details the sequence of events in March 2004, analyzes the Syrian government's response, and assesses the immediate aftermath and consequences within this timeframe [User Query]. The uprising stands as a significant marker, revealing the depths of Kurdish alienation and their capacity for collective action against decades of state repression.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Background: Decades of Marginalization (Pre-2004)

The roots of the 2004 Qamishli Uprising lie in decades of systematic discrimination and marginalization experienced by Syria's Kurdish population under the rule of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party.

### A. Systemic Discrimination under Ba'ath Rule

Syria's Kurds constitute the country's largest non-Arab ethnic minority, estimated at 1.5 to 3 million people, or roughly 10-15% of the total population prior to 2011, primarily residing in northern and northeastern regions.<sup>5</sup> The Ba'athist regime, ideologically grounded in pan-Arab nationalism, historically viewed expressions of distinct Kurdish identity as a potential threat to national unity and state integrity.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Kurds were often treated as second-class citizens, facing exclusion from influential positions within the government and military apparatus.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Kurdish regions suffered from purposeful underdevelopment relative to other parts of Syria, lacking comparable social and economic infrastructure and public services.<sup>6</sup>

### B. Denial of Citizenship and Identity

A pivotal moment in the formal marginalization of Syrian Kurds occurred with the

"extraordinary" census conducted in al-Hasakah governorate in 1962.<sup>10</sup> This census arbitrarily stripped an estimated 120,000 to 150,000 Kurds of their Syrian citizenship, officially classifying them as *ajanib*, or foreigners.<sup>4</sup> The official justification was that these individuals were "alien infiltrators" from neighboring countries, despite many having lived in Syria for generations.<sup>4</sup> Their descendants inherited this stateless status. Another category, the *maktoumeen* (unregistered or "muted"), comprised those unable to register even as *ajanib*, often children of unions between *ajanib* and Syrian citizens, leaving them in an even more precarious legal limbo.<sup>4</sup>

By 2004, hundreds of thousands of Kurds were affected by statelessness.<sup>10</sup> This status carried severe consequences, denying them fundamental civil rights enjoyed by Syrian nationals. Stateless Kurds could not vote, legally own property or businesses, register marriages, obtain passports, access state employment, or enroll in public universities.<sup>4</sup> They carried identification cards marking them as "foreigners".<sup>11</sup> This policy created a significant population segment living under conditions of profound discrimination and legal vulnerability.<sup>14</sup>

## **C. Cultural Repression**

The Ba'athist state actively suppressed Kurdish cultural expression. The Kurdish language (Kurmanji) was banned from use in official establishments, education, workplaces, and even private celebrations.<sup>4</sup> Parents were prohibited from registering their children with Kurdish names, and businesses could not carry Kurdish signs.<sup>4</sup> Kurdish music and publications were forbidden.<sup>4</sup> Cultural events, most notably the Nowruz (Kurdish New Year) festival, were severely restricted or banned, often becoming flashpoints for tension.<sup>4</sup> The state also pursued a policy of Arabizing Kurdish place names, further eroding Kurdish cultural geography.<sup>4</sup> This systematic suppression aimed to assimilate Kurds into the dominant Arab national identity.<sup>4</sup>

## **D. Demographic Engineering**

Beginning in the 1970s, the Syrian government implemented the "Arab Belt" program, resettling Arab families from other parts of Syria into traditionally Kurdish areas along the borders with Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.<sup>10</sup> This policy was explicitly designed to alter the demographic composition of the region, creating a buffer of Arab settlement and diluting the Kurdish presence.<sup>10</sup> This demographic manipulation fueled inter-ethnic tensions, particularly over land use, as resettled Arabs were sometimes granted grazing rights on Kurdish lands, which Kurds could not legally contest.<sup>10</sup>

## **E. Shifting Dynamics with the PKK**

From the late 1970s until 1998, the Syrian regime under Hafez al-Assad provided sanctuary and support to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a militant group fighting for Kurdish rights in Turkey.<sup>8</sup> This support was primarily a geopolitical tool to exert pressure on neighboring Turkey, a NATO member.<sup>9</sup> However, this uneasy alliance ended with the 1998 Adana Agreement between Syria and Turkey, under which Damascus committed to ceasing support for the PKK

and cracking down on its activities.<sup>10</sup> This policy shift led to increased repression against Syrian Kurds suspected of PKK affiliation or sympathies, with reports of assassinations and extraditions of PKK cadres.<sup>10</sup> In the early 2000s, new Syrian Kurdish political parties emerged, influenced by the PKK's evolving ideology towards democratic autonomy, most notably the Democratic Union Party (PYD) founded in 2003.<sup>10</sup>

## **F. Pre-existing Tensions and Regional Context**

Decades of discriminatory policies and demographic changes had created a climate of deep-seated tension between Kurdish inhabitants and Arab settlers in northeastern Syria, particularly in ethnically mixed cities like Qamishli.<sup>11</sup> The regional context in early 2004 was also significant. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 had overthrown Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime and led to the empowerment of Iraqi Kurds, who established a significant autonomous region.<sup>9</sup> This development fueled resentment among some Syrian Arabs, who blamed Kurds for the fall of an Arab regime with which communities in eastern Syria had tribal ties.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, it may have increased assertiveness among Syrian Kurds.<sup>2</sup> The Syrian regime itself felt increasingly isolated internationally and potentially vulnerable.<sup>17</sup> This volatile mix of long-term grievances, local tensions, and regional shifts set the stage for the eruption in March 2004.

## **III. The Qamishli Uprising: March 12-18, 2004**

The simmering tensions ignited on Friday, March 12, 2004, during a football match in Qamishli, rapidly escalating into widespread protests and violent confrontations.

### **A. The Spark: The Football Match (March 12)**

The catalyst for the uprising was a Syrian league football match between the local Qamishli-based team, Al-Jihad, predominantly supported by Kurds, and Al-Fatwa, a team from Deir ez-Zor with primarily Arab supporters.<sup>10</sup> According to multiple accounts, tensions flared when fans of the visiting Al-Fatwa team began chanting provocative slogans, insulting Iraqi Kurdish leaders Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, and reportedly brandishing portraits of Saddam Hussein, whose regime had brutally oppressed Iraqi Kurds.<sup>10</sup> In response, some Kurdish fans reportedly chanted slogans praising US President George W. Bush, whose administration had overthrown Saddam.<sup>10</sup> The provocations quickly escalated into violent clashes between the rival fan groups within the stadium and spilling onto the pitch, involving the use of sticks, stones, and knives.<sup>11</sup>

### **B. Initial Security Force Response (March 12)**

Syrian police and security forces intervened to quell the violence at the stadium.<sup>11</sup> However, numerous sources allege that the security forces acted with bias, primarily targeting the Kurdish fans and siding with the Arab supporters from Deir ez-Zor.<sup>2</sup> Critically, security forces reportedly resorted to using live ammunition against the Kurdish crowd almost immediately.<sup>2</sup> This initial intervention resulted in fatalities; reports indicate that between six and nine people,

all Kurds and including children, were killed at the stadium on March 12.<sup>2</sup> Initial reports mentioned deaths due to trampling in the chaos, but these were later largely disputed, with gunfire cited as the primary cause of death.<sup>17</sup>

### **C. Escalation and Spread of Protests (March 13 onwards)**

The killings at the stadium acted as an accelerant, transforming the initial riot into a widespread popular uprising. On March 13, the funerals held for the victims killed the previous day turned into massive, angry demonstrations in Qamishli.<sup>19</sup> Mourners openly defied the regime, chanting anti-Bashar al-Assad slogans and raising Kurdish flags, potent symbols of Kurdish identity suppressed by the state.<sup>23</sup>

The state's response to these funeral processions further inflamed the situation. Eyewitnesses reported that security forces, travelling in military-style jeeps, opened fire indiscriminately into the long funeral march in Qamishli on March 13.<sup>2</sup> This second wave of shooting resulted in numerous additional deaths and injuries, with one source reporting 23 killed on that day alone.<sup>14</sup>

Fueled by the mounting casualties and decades of pent-up frustration, the protests rapidly spread beyond Qamishli. Over the following days, demonstrations and riots erupted in numerous other Kurdish-populated towns and cities across northern and northeastern Syria, including Amuda, Afrin, Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), al-Hasakah, Derik, Sari Kani (Ras al-Ayn), al-Qahtaniya, and al-Malkiya, as well as in the Kurdish-majority neighborhoods of Syria's largest cities, Aleppo (Ashrafiyeh and Sheikh Maqsoud) and Damascus (Dummar, Rukneddin).<sup>1</sup> The protests took on an explicitly anti-regime character. Demonstrators attacked symbols of Ba'athist authority, burning down the party's local office in Qamishli and, significantly, toppling a statue of the former president, Hafez al-Assad, echoing the iconic toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad the previous year.<sup>10</sup> Other government buildings, such as the water authority, customs office, and agricultural supplies building in Qamishli, were also targeted and sometimes set ablaze.<sup>14</sup> In Amuda, protestors reportedly attacked a police station.<sup>2</sup> The events marked the first large-scale, violent Kurdish uprising against the Syrian state.<sup>1</sup>

## **IV. Syrian Government Response and Repression**

The Syrian government reacted to the burgeoning uprising with swift and overwhelming force, aiming to quickly re-establish control and suppress the unprecedented challenge to its authority.

### **A. Military Crackdown**

The Syrian military was rapidly deployed to quell the unrest. Thousands of troops, supported by tanks and helicopters, were sent into Qamishli and other major Kurdish towns, effectively surrounding them.<sup>10</sup> Security forces, including riot police, launched extensive crackdown operations to regain control of the streets.<sup>2</sup> Human rights organizations documented numerous accounts of excessive and lethal force being used against largely unarmed Kurdish

civilians during these operations.<sup>2</sup> There were also reports suggesting the government armed or utilized adjacent Arab tribes or villages to assist in suppressing the protests and intimidating the Kurdish population.<sup>10</sup>

## **B. Mass Arrests and Detentions**

Parallel to the military deployment, the security services initiated a campaign of mass arrests targeting the Kurdish population. Estimates suggest that over 2,000 individuals, the vast majority of them Kurds, were detained in the days and weeks following March 12.<sup>2</sup> These arrests were often arbitrary, sweeping up young men, women, the elderly, and even children as young as 12 or 14 years old.<sup>2</sup> Random round-ups of young Kurdish men in cities like Qamishli and Damascus were reported.<sup>14</sup> Many of those arrested were held incommunicado, their whereabouts unknown to their families, placing them at heightened risk of abuse.<sup>14</sup>

## **C. Torture and Ill-Treatment Allegations**

Numerous credible reports emerged from detainees, former prisoners, and human rights organizations documenting the widespread use of torture and ill-treatment against Kurds arrested in connection with the uprising.<sup>2</sup> Testimonies described brutal methods including severe beatings with various objects (whips, woodblocks, hands, feet), the application of electric shocks, pulling out fingernails, burning genitalia, forcing objects into the rectum, suspending victims from the ceiling, and dousing them with cold water.<sup>6</sup> At least five or six Kurds reportedly died in detention as a result of torture or mistreatment in the months following the March 2004 events.<sup>6</sup> Despite complaints being raised, even in court proceedings, investigations into torture allegations were reportedly not conducted, and perpetrators within the security forces acted with impunity.<sup>2</sup> Notably, Syria acceded to the UN Convention Against Torture in August 2004 but entered a reservation against Article 20, which allows for independent investigations into systematic torture allegations.<sup>30</sup>

## **D. Official Narrative and Actions**

The Syrian government sought to control the narrative surrounding the events, publicly downplaying them as mere "riots" or disturbances rather than a politically motivated uprising.<sup>19</sup> Officials propagated claims that the unrest was instigated by "foreign forces" or infiltrators aiming to destabilize Syria, sometimes specifically alleging collaboration between Syrian Kurdish parties and external actors seeking to annex Syrian territory to northern Iraq.<sup>11</sup> In an attempt to restore calm and project an image of national unity, President Bashar al-Assad visited the region following the crackdown.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, the government announced pardons or amnesties for some of those arrested, although the exact numbers and scope varied in reports (figures like 312 or 600 released were mentioned, while other sources noted many were amnestied over time, but key activists or members of certain groups like the PYD were excluded).<sup>2</sup> Concurrently, punitive measures were taken against perceived participants, including the expulsion of dozens of Kurdish students from universities across Syria for alleged involvement in peaceful protests.<sup>15</sup>

## **V. Immediate Aftermath and Consequences (2004-2009)**

The Qamishli Uprising and the state's violent response had profound and lasting consequences for Syria's Kurdish population and their relationship with the Ba'athist regime in the years leading up to 2010.

### **A. Casualties and Displacement**

The immediate human cost of the March 2004 events was significant. While official Syrian figures cited 25 deaths, Kurdish sources and international human rights organizations consistently reported higher numbers, generally estimating that at least 30 to 43 people, overwhelmingly Kurds, were killed during the clashes and subsequent crackdown.<sup>2</sup> Over 160 people were reported injured.<sup>2</sup>

The violence and ensuing repression triggered a significant wave of displacement. Thousands of Syrian Kurds fled the country, seeking refuge in the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).<sup>10</sup> In response, authorities in the KRI, along with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other UN agencies, established refugee camps, notably the Moqebleh camp near Dohuk, to accommodate the influx.<sup>11</sup> Conditions in these camps were basic, often consisting of concrete block houses or tarpaulin-covered structures, with communal facilities.<sup>11</sup> Many refugees remained in these camps for years, unable or unwilling to return to Syria under the prevailing political conditions.<sup>11</sup>

### **B. Heightened Repression and Surveillance**

The 2004 uprising marked a definitive negative turning point in relations between the Syrian state and its Kurdish minority.<sup>2</sup> Alarmed by the scale of the mobilization, the Syrian leadership adopted a harsher policy of increased repression against Kurdish political and cultural expression in the subsequent years.<sup>2</sup> Authorities explicitly stated that Kurdish gatherings or political activities would no longer be tolerated.<sup>2</sup>

This intensified crackdown manifested in several ways. Security services actively suppressed attempts at public assembly, including demonstrations for Kurdish rights, cultural celebrations like Nowruz, solidarity events with Kurds in neighboring countries, and commemorations of the 2004 uprising itself.<sup>2</sup> In some instances, security forces used lethal force against such gatherings, as seen in the shooting deaths of three Kurds during Nowruz celebrations in March 2008.<sup>2</sup> Even minor acts, like a five-minute vigil held by schoolchildren in 2008 to remember the Qamishli events, resulted in investigations by security services.<sup>2</sup>

Prominent Kurdish political leaders and activists faced increased persecution, including arrests and trials, often before military courts or the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), which lacked basic fair trial guarantees.<sup>2</sup> Charges commonly included vague accusations like "inciting strife" or "weakening national sentiment".<sup>3</sup> Beyond formal persecution, Kurds injured during the uprising or known participants found themselves placed on security "red lists,"

effectively barring them from government employment opportunities.<sup>19</sup>

### **C. Kurdish Political Response and Consciousness**

Despite, or perhaps because of, the intensified repression, the 2004 uprising appeared to foster a greater sense of political consciousness and assertiveness among Syrian Kurds.<sup>2</sup> The events were widely seen within the community as a pivotal moment (*Serhildan*), demonstrating a collective will to resist oppression and demand rights.<sup>3</sup> Some Kurdish activists and analysts began to view the uprising as sowing the seeds for a new political era, highlighting the perceived need for greater Kurdish self-reliance, including potential self-administration and defense structures.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, while the regime attempted to frame the events in ethnic terms and potentially incite Kurdish-Arab strife, reports suggest this largely failed.<sup>10</sup> In the aftermath, nascent Kurdish political groups like the PYD reportedly began efforts to build alliances with Arab opposition figures in the Jazira region, recognizing shared grievances against the authoritarian state.<sup>10</sup> The uprising, therefore, not only solidified Kurdish opposition to the regime but also potentially laid groundwork for cross-ethnic political cooperation in the face of state repression.

## **VI. Significance and Legacy (Pre-2010 Perspective)**

Viewed from the perspective of the years immediately following, up to 2009, the Qamishli Uprising held considerable significance within the Syrian political landscape. It marked the dramatic emergence of overt Kurdish anti-establishment protest on a scale previously unseen in Syria.<sup>1</sup> The sheer size and spread of the demonstrations took the Syrian government by surprise, revealing a capacity for mobilization within the Kurdish community that the authorities had perhaps underestimated.<sup>1</sup>

The events garnered significant international media attention, thrusting the long-neglected "Kurdish problem" in Syria onto the world stage and increasing its visibility.<sup>1</sup> Within Syria, although the regime attempted to dismiss the events as mere riots, some Syrian opposition figures viewed the uprising as a significant expression of the broader popular desire to challenge tyranny and authoritarian rule.<sup>19</sup>

For many Kurds and some analysts observing the situation before 2010, the uprising was considered a watershed moment, a foundational event, or even the "first spark" potentially igniting future struggles for rights and recognition.<sup>23</sup> It demonstrated that despite decades of repression, cultural suppression, and political marginalization, the Kurdish population retained a strong sense of identity and the potential for collective action.<sup>1</sup>

However, the immediate legacy also included a hardening of the state's position. The uprising confirmed the regime's perception of Kurdish identity and political aspirations as a fundamental threat, leading directly to the intensified crackdown on all forms of Kurdish political and cultural expression documented in the post-2004 years.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while raising Kurdish consciousness and international awareness, the uprising also ushered in a period of even harsher state control and surveillance for Syria's Kurds in the years leading up to 2010.

## VII. Conclusion

The Qamishli Uprising of March 2004 stands as a pivotal event in the pre-2010 history of Syria's Kurds. Ignited by provocations at a football match, the unrest rapidly escalated into a widespread expression of deep-seated grievances stemming from decades of systematic discrimination, statelessness, cultural suppression, and political marginalization under the Ba'athist regime. The unprecedented scale of Kurdish mobilization, marked by protests across numerous cities and direct challenges to state symbols, represented a significant departure from previous patterns of dissent.

The Syrian government's response was characterized by swift and brutal repression, involving the deployment of military force, the use of lethal violence against protestors, mass arbitrary arrests, and widespread allegations of torture and ill-treatment in detention. The immediate aftermath saw dozens killed, hundreds injured, thousands detained, and a significant outflow of Kurdish refugees into neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan.

In the years following the uprising (up to 2009), the Syrian state intensified its repressive measures against the Kurdish minority, further restricting political and cultural activities and increasing surveillance and persecution of activists. Simultaneously, the events appeared to galvanize Kurdish political consciousness, fostering a greater sense of collective identity and assertiveness in demanding rights. Viewed within the context of the period before 2010, the Qamishli Uprising was a watershed moment, demonstrating the potent combination of accumulated grievances and the capacity for mass protest among Syria's Kurds, while also foreshadowing the state's unwavering commitment to suppressing dissent through force. It irrevocably altered the relationship between the Syrian state and its Kurdish population, setting a somber precedent for state response to popular mobilization.

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