

## The Story of the “Maktoumeen”: How Did the Statelessness Crisis Take Shape in Syria?



On the sixth of this April, the Ministry of Interior began receiving applications for Syrian citizenship for those covered by the provisions of Decree No. (13), issued by President Ahmed al-Sharaa on January 16, 2026, which stipulates that Syrian Kurdish citizens are an essential and indigenous part of the Syrian people, and that their cultural and linguistic identity is an inseparable part of Syria’s pluralistic and unified national identity. Accordingly, the decree provides for granting Syrian citizenship to all citizens of Kurdish origin residing on Syrian territory, including the “unregistered” (Maktoumeen), with full equality in rights and duties.

The decision has once again cast a spotlight on the issue of the “Maktoumeen,” whose roots go back to the 1930s. It is not a new issue in the country’s history, as some might assume, but one closely tied to al-Hasakah Governorate, which is considered the largest reservoir of stateless people in Syria.

### The 1938 Agreement and the Beginning of the Predicament

Syria has long been a historical destination for multiple waves of migration that blended into its social fabric. Yet the concept of “citizenship” took on complex

dimensions with the emergence of the phenomenon of “stateless persons” during the French Mandate. Since its legal emergence in 1925, Syrian nationality was not merely a legal description; it became a tool of pressure amid border and political tensions between the French Mandate authorities and the Turkish government.

This was clearly manifested in the events of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, which witnessed the first policies of forced demographic engineering, later consolidated in the “Nationality Protocol” attached to the July 23, 1938 agreement between Turkey and France, which paved the way for the annexation of the Sanjak to Turkey in 1939, leaving thousands of families with only two choices.

The status of the population under this agreement was marked by what could be described as a “soft population exchange,” which appeared voluntary on the surface, while its actual political function was to allow Turkey to rid itself of as many groups as possible that obstructed its policies of national integration. Thus, the population exchange process turned into a denationalization process, as the residents of the Sanjak of Alexandretta were forced to choose between Turkish and Syrian nationality before large numbers of them fled into the Syrian interior.

At the same time, the 1930 agreement guaranteeing freedom of movement and grazing between the two countries was canceled, severing the human and geographic continuity of Kurdish and Arab tribes on both sides of the border. The actual function of the Franco-Turkish protocol was to strip Turkish nationality from Kurds, Syrians, and Armenians who had fled to al-Jazira, and to confiscate their property.

This reality drove tens of thousands of them to flee into the Syrian interior, turning the protocol into a tool for creating a vast legal vacuum. The waves of displacement continued for years: Aleppo received hundreds of Syriac families in the 1940s, while Syrian al-Jazira was the main destination for these migrations, which left demographic and administrative problems whose effects still persist.

The crisis began with the policies of the Turkish government under İsmet İnönü, which involved confiscating the property of Kurdish tribes and stripping them of their nationality. This led to major waves of migration toward Syrian al-Jazira, especially between 1937 and 1938, creating a human mass that found no place in Syria’s official records and later became known as the phenomenon of the “Maktoumeen.”

These human masses settled in al-Hasakah, prompting the Syrian government under Bahij al-Khatib to issue a legislative decree on August 31, 1939, opening the door for the naturalization and civil registration of the Maktoumeen in al-

Jazira for six months, with the aim of integrating the displaced and granting them Syrian legal status while exempting them from penalties.

Estimates of the number of Maktoumeen at the time ranged between 40,000 and 75,000 people, a large discrepancy reflecting the scale of the gap between French statistics and Syrian national records in that period. This registration process produced a noticeable change in official figures, as the number of al-Hasakah Governorate residents registered in civil records rose by 38.4%, a direct result of intensive naturalization and registration operations.

### Unceasing Migration and Ineffective Government Solutions

After independence, the Syrian national government tried to put an end to the infiltration of Kurdish migrants across the border. The post-independence period in 1943 marked a pivotal turning point in managing the demography and citizenship file in the Syrian al-Jazira region. After the national government assumed responsibility for the civil registry from the Mandate authorities, it adopted a completely different policy, shifting from an “expansionist approach” of absorption and naturalization to a strict “restrictive approach,” whose main goal was to curb uncontrolled migration flows from Turkey.

By 1944, the Syrian government had begun implementing firm measures to control border infiltration, including detaining anyone without personal identification and imposing new restrictions on the transactions of the “Maktoumeen.” In April of that same year, the authorities raised the bar for granting citizenship, drafting a bill that increased the required residency period from five years to ten.

The government did not stop there. It subjected civil records to broad audits that uncovered serious errors and major corruption in previous transactions, prompting the authorities to cancel records and withdraw documents from individuals deemed not to meet the conditions, in a move aimed at correcting what the state saw as “illegal registration” or registration resulting from incomplete investigations.

While the state succeeded in restricting “registration,” “migration” from Turkey continued quietly. Observers such as Ahmad Wasfi Zakaria pointed to the continued arrival of migrants, including Kurdish sheikhs and aghas fleeing Turkish exile policies, who took Syrian al-Jazira as their refuge.

This silent migration left a tangible demographic and urban impact that contrasted with the decline in official registry figures. Al-Jazira witnessed a boom in urban expansion, with the number of inhabited villages rising from 1,250 in 1940 to 1,800 in 1945. This increase was concentrated particularly in the districts of Qamishli and al-Malikiyah “Derik,” confirming that the period between

1943 and 1947 clearly showed that the Syrian government’s restrictive policy succeeded in controlling official paperwork, but failed to control the human reality.

While official records were stagnant, the villages and rural expanses of al-Jazira were witnessing active construction and settlement, forming a striking chapter in the region’s history in which human presence always preceded legal recognition of identity.

A Kurdish female protester demands Kurdish rights in Syria (AFP)

### The Exceptional Census

The continued flow of migration from Turkey brought major change to the al-Jazira region, widening the gap between the numbers recorded in civil registries and the actual population on the ground. Poverty and unrest in Kurdish areas within Turkey drove thousands of families toward Syrian territory, specifically al-Hasakah Governorate, which was experiencing an “agricultural revolution” and required labor. While Syrian al-Jazira represented an attractive refuge, these migrants faced a dead end in obtaining citizenship, leading to the formation of a growing human mass that the Syrian state did not legally recognize.

The “exceptional census,” carried out by the government of Khalid al-Azm on October 5, 1962, transformed this mass from “migrants” into “stateless persons” by force of law. The census adopted 1945 as the cutoff date for Syrian citizenship, considering anyone whose records were not established before that date to be a “foreigner,” regardless of how long they had lived in the country or how integrated they were into Syria’s social fabric.

The census resulted in the registration of 85,000 “residents” in al-Hasakah Governorate as foreigners in a single day, equivalent to 27.5% of the governorate’s population of 309,279, according to civil status records at the time. Their number across al-Jazira as a whole was estimated at around 125,000, nearly 53% of the total Kurdish population in the region, according to 1963 security estimates, which put the Kurdish population at around 160,000. In practical terms, this meant transforming the Kurds from a demographic majority in al-Jazira into a large minority.

These Kurdish human masses were recorded in state registers under the category of “Turkey foreigners” and were deprived of basic civil rights, including property ownership and freedom of movement, even though many of them had previously obtained Syrian identity documents, whether through the “Maktoumeen” system or by performing compulsory service in the Syrian army.

The census was not merely an administrative measure, but a clear political tool in

an attempt to “Arabize al-Jazira” and confront what was called the “Kurdish tide.” The late President Adib al-Shishakli was among the first to take note of this issue, based on recommendations from American intelligence, which warned him of the emergence of a communist revolution led by the Kurds with Soviet backing, whose repercussions would extend to Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria.

Although al-Shishakli did not take actual measures regarding the Kurdish migrant file due to the brevity of his rule, this concern remained present in the Syrian political mindset toward the issue. The stripping of citizenship was publicly justified as a step to protect national identity, according to the government at the time, turning the region’s demographic plurality into a security issue of an existential nature.

The census ultimately created a category of “stateless persons” within the borders of the state, later called “foreigners of the governorate,” after the Turkish side objected to calling them “Turkey foreigners.” This historical trajectory formed the first chapter in the coercive identity policies that characterized the Syrian state’s treatment of Kurds in al-Jazira, where security and ideological considerations were prioritized over rights and citizenship, depriving tens of thousands of their most basic rights and leaving them in a state of forced non-belonging for long decades.

A sample individual registration statement for al-Hasakah foreigners (Taazur Victims Association)

### Three Layers of Society in al-Hasakah

Society in al-Hasakah Governorate is described as one of the most complex and diverse in Syria, shaped primarily by migrations coming from outside. Faced with the Syrian government’s confused policy toward it since independence, a chaotic reality took shape regarding “civil records” in al-Hasakah, and society was divided into three sections whose problems accumulated over decades, from the 1962 census to the changes that followed 2011, the year Decree 49 was issued, granting Syrian citizenship to nearly a quarter of a million Kurds.

This division is mainly linked to the government’s differing treatment of the large migration waves coming from Turkey at the beginning of the last century, of which Kurds formed the largest share, alongside Syrians, Armenians, and Mhallami Arabs. These migrations contributed to a major change in the composition of society in al-Hasakah, the capital of Syrian al-Jazira. Historically, civil status records in al-Hasakah are based on three main classifications that determine the status of residents in terms of rights and duties:

First: Syrian citizens — those who hold full citizenship, are officially registered in civil status records, and carry a “national number” and a “family record number.”

Second: al-Hasakah foreigners — a category resulting mostly from the 1962 census, including people who could not prove residence before 1945 (the overwhelming majority of them migrant Kurds from Turkey). They were treated as “residents” under an identification card granted to them, known as the “red card,” and were deprived of property ownership, voting, and public employment until Legislative Decree No. (49) of 2011 was issued, granting them citizenship. It had been issued by deposed regime president Bashar al-Assad.

Third: the unregistered (Maktoumeen) — individuals who have no legal existence whatsoever (no record, no family number, and no national ID). This category includes broad ethnic diversity (Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, and the Qurbat/Nawar), and they carry only a “Maktoum document,” which prevents them from exercising basic civil rights.

### Kurds Are Not the Only Maktoumeen!

For decades, the label “Maktoum al-Qayd” was associated with Kurds, but in reality Syria includes other ethnic groups that are still classified in this category. Among them are hundreds of Arab residents, most of them concentrated in the al-Jazira region, originally from semi-nomadic and Bedouin families whose way of life imposed instability and distance from urban centers, preventing them from obtaining official documents since the formation of the Syrian state.

Before the outbreak of the revolution in 2011, they tried many times to obtain Syrian citizenship, but their requests were rejected. Hussein, one of the Arab Maktoumeen from the town of al-Ya’rubiyah in al-Hasakah, told NoonPost:

“We were born without any official identity papers. We are Arabs from the al-Dulaim tribe, and we have lived here for decades, but we have no nationality. There are many others like us from other tribes. We enjoy no rights of any kind: no education, no healthcare, no jobs, and we have no identity papers. During the events of the revolution, the absence of these documents caused us enormous problems. We tried before the revolution to obtain citizenship, but our demands were rejected. Today, with the issuance of Presidential Decree 13 granting citizenship to the Kurds, we hope for a similar measure concerning us, one that grants us our rights as citizens.”

Other communities also fall under the category of “Maktoumeen” or stateless persons in Syria, such as the Qurbat and the Nawar, ethnic groups whose lives are based on roaming and movement within the country. Anthropologist Dr. Ali al-Jabawi notes in his book “The Nawar Tribes in Bilad al-Sham” that the Nawar and Qurbat share a common origin, an ethnic group that came from India to the Balkan states before reaching the Arab East. They form multiple tribes, each with its own profession, are Muslim, have their own language called “Dumwari” or “al-

Asfoura,” and are spread across most regions of Syria.

Their legal status remains chaotic to this day. Some of them obtained a “foreigner” document, as in some Nawar tribes in Homs, the coast, and Aleppo, but they remained non-naturalized. By contrast, the majority remained classified as Maktoumeen, with virtually no rights, even though the presence of some of them in the country dates back to the Ottoman era. On top of that, they face a condescending view from a broad segment of society, which attaches to them accusations and stories that can sometimes verge on fantasy.

With the issuance of Presidential Decree No. (13) granting citizenship to the Kurds, the issue of naturalization has returned to the forefront once again, amid hopes among a large proportion of the Maktoumeen population that they will be treated equally with the Kurds and the rest of the Syrian people in obtaining citizenship and the associated rights of citizenship, a legitimate right.

As Kurdish Maktoumeen begin submitting naturalization applications, their actual numbers remain unclear so far. According to reports by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) and legal sources that followed the implementation of Decree 49 of 2011, the number of Kurds in the “Maktoum al-Qayd” category who were directly naturalized under that decree was zero, because the decree explicitly stipulated granting citizenship only to the category of “al-Hasakah foreigners.”

However, an indirect naturalization process did take place for part of the “Maktoum al-Qayd” category through later stages, with around 50,400 people managing to regularize their status and obtain Syrian citizenship in this way between 2011 and 2018, while the larger portion of the Maktoumeen remained without nationality.

The naturalization mechanism at the time stipulated that a “Maktoum al-Qayd” person must first submit a request to “correct status” in order to be registered as a “foreigner,” and after that registration was accepted, they became eligible to obtain Syrian citizenship under Decree 49.

According to the report, by early 2011 the number of “al-Hasakah foreigners” (holders of the red card) registered in the directorate’s records had reached 346,242 individuals. By the end of May 2018, the number of those from this category who had obtained Syrian citizenship had reached 326,489 individuals, while 19,753 of them still had not obtained Syrian citizenship to this day. Civil status departments and registries across the country continue to receive naturalization applications to this day under a dedicated mechanism established by the Syrian Ministry of Interior.

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