

Kurds endure poverty, grapple with assimilation

By Brooke Anderson

BEIRUT: As a teenager in a rural area of predominantly Kurdish southeast Turkey, Bahaeddin Hassan heard of a far-off, beautiful place called Lebanon. He was starstruck.

At 15, he traveled overland through Syria to Beirut. Lebanon was not quite the paradise he had hoped for. Life was harsh, and for many years Hassan took whatever odd jobs came his way.

Today, at 57, having become a Lebanese citizen who has found fulfilling and lucrative work as a clothing exporter, he says he has stayed in his adopted land because it is indeed beautiful.

But he laments the hardships many of his fellow Lebanese Kurds continue to endure.

“We got nationality, but we didn’t get anything else,” says Hassan, president of the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association.

“No one protects or defends us. No one hears our voices.”

«“the naturalized are... ‘prisoners’ of the one thing that should have freed them -- their citizenship, because many believe that they owe their citizenship to one politician or other.”»While most of Lebanon’s Kurds have become citizens, many have yet to feel truly at home within Lebanese society because the community continues to struggle with low education, high unemployment and lack of political representation.

Sitting in her home under a roof cobbled together out of scrap metal and tires, Fadia Mahmoud Ismail, 41, says she is proud of her Kurdish heritage, although she wouldn’t consider leaving Lebanon, which has been her home since she came to Beirut as a 13-year-old bride, a conflicted sentiment echoed by many in the community.

“I don’t feel Lebanese,” Ismail says. “My culture and language are Kurdish. I know I’m Kurdish, and that won’t change.”

While she has no plans to leave Lebanon, Ismail does wish that she and her fellow Kurds had greater recognition in Lebanese government and society. “I’d be happy if I turned on the TV and saw a Kurdish representative,” she says.

In 1994, a total of 10,000 Kurds were granted citizenship under late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the second round of Kurdish naturalization after a handful of Kurds got citizenship in the 1960s under then-Interior Minister Kamal Jumblatt. After generations of statelessness, a status that

excluded them from public and private sector services, many of Lebanon's Kurds finally got the chance to enjoy the basic benefits of Lebanese society.

However, their citizenship came at a price, as the Kurds, like all other communities in Lebanon, were forced to become part of the country's sectarian system.

Considered Sunni Muslims by the government, they don't have any specific representation in Parliament, unlike Armenians, many of whom migrated to Lebanon at around the same time.

When it comes to charitable funding, their only non-governmental organization, the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association, is overshadowed by larger Muslim organizations. Among other concerns, Kurds have long worried about a lack of resources to provide their children with instruction in the Kurdish language. More recently, the organization has been struggling to help Kurds fleeing the violence in Syria.

Kurds were initially prevented from obtaining citizenship because of fears that they would upset the country's delicate sectarian balance. Later, many were naturalized for the benefit of Sunni politicians who sought their votes. But that has hardly garnered them political clout. Kurds say that in a recurrent cycle, once election time has passed, politicians no longer pay them any heed.

A report published in November by Guita Hourani at Notre Dame University-Louaize, documenting the community's upward mobility via naturalization, found that "the naturalized are not at all 'free' in their voting behavior, but are rather 'prisoners' of the one thing that should have freed them – their citizenship, because many believe that they owe their citizenship to one politician or other."

Hourani notes that "the Kurds and other naturalized citizens continue to rely heavily on political patrons who, in return for favors going back to the event of naturalization in the first place, pay them back at the ballot box."

And approximately 40 percent of Kurds in Lebanon do not even have Lebanese citizenship. For years, their identification cards have indicated that their status is "under consideration."

Today, after years of living in abject poverty, with menial jobs passed on from one generation to the next, little education and no political representation, Lebanon's Kurds continue to struggle to escape their dire circumstances, despite the modicum of security attained through citizenship. Indeed, Kurds remain the least educated group in Lebanon.

Although many Lebanese Kurds have come to Lebanon in recent decades, Lebanon's Kurdish community dates back to the 12th century, when the Ayyubids took control of the region. Later, the Ottomans sent loyal Kurdish families from the empire's interior to modern-day Syria and Lebanon, where they played an important administrative role.

These families – which included the Janbulad family, ancestors of Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt – became fully assimilated into the local culture.

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I, Lebanon saw its first major wave of Kurdish migration, when thousands of Kurds left Turkey for nearby Lebanon and Syria. The second significant influx of Kurds to Lebanon took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as many fled poverty and political repression in Syria and Turkey.

Although there are non-Muslim Kurdish communities in other countries, the Kurds of Lebanon all share the Sunni Muslim faith, as well as an emotional affinity for their ancestral homeland, which spans parts of modern-day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. They speak two dialects of Kurdish, Kurmanji and Mhallami (a mixture of Arabic, Kurdish, Syriac and Turkish). Despite the linguistic difference, the two tend to be mutually intelligible, though Kurmanji speakers are generally better able to understand Mhallami speakers than vice versa.

Otherwise, the Kurds in Lebanon couldn't be more divided, with the community's estimated 60,000 having aligned themselves with a plethora of political parties throughout the country's turbulent modern history, often to the detriment of their own well-being and security.

During Lebanon's Civil War, Kurds fought in the ranks of Lebanese left-wing and Palestinian militias, hoping to earn money and allies. Instead, their conflicting allegiances and lack of unity left them vulnerable, forcing the resettlement of Kurds who were no longer safe in their previously ethnically diverse neighborhoods.

In the early 1990s, following the Lebanese government's destruction of several of Beirut's squatter quarters, to which many Kurdish families had relocated during the war, about a quarter of Lebanon's Kurds emigrated to European countries, while many others left the country's capital for the Bekaa Valley, Tripoli and Syria, further scattering much of the already fragmented community.

One Lebanese Kurd, while acknowledging his community's difficult circumstances, suggests that Kurds themselves could do more to initiate change.

"We can't put the blame entirely on the authorities and society. The Kurds are also to blame for their lack of upward mobility," says Lokman Meho, director of university libraries at the American University of Beirut

"Most are illiterate, many families prevented their girls from going to school, and menial jobs are passed from one generation to the next," adds Meho, a rare example of a Lebanese Kurd who has reached a high level of professional success.

His parents, who had never attended school themselves, encouraged their children to pursue an education.

Because of his Lebanese citizenship, Meho qualified for a college scholarship from the Hariri Foundation, allowing him to attend AUB. He then went on to obtain his master's in library science and doctorate in information technology from universities in the U.S., returning to Lebanon three years ago to run the AUB libraries.

Despite his level of education and work, Meho says that growing up he always felt like a second-class citizen. Lebanese biases are often sectarian in nature, but Meho's childhood was spent among neighborhood kids who, despite being fellow Muslims, called him "dirty" and "foreigner."

"All Kurds are proud to be Kurdish and Lebanese. They feel both identities equally," Meho believes. Still, he thinks, "it could have been more tilted toward Lebanese if they hadn't suffered so much."

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Feb-09/162690-kurds-endure-poverty-grapple-with-assimilation.ashx#axzz1xdhUKr>

Copyrights 2011, The Daily Star - All Rights Reserved
09/02/2012