

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT OF BOOK PUBLISHING IN KURDISH LANGUAGE IN SYRIA

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CONTENTS

Contents of the research and some terms	4
1. Kurdish writers and book production in Syria	6
1.1 An impeded mother-tongue	6
1.1.1 Writing in spite of regime's pressure	6
1.2 Translators	9
1.3 Proof-reading, pre-print, design	9
1.4 Writers' organizations	9
1.5 Literature days, commemoration gatherings, contests and awards	9
2. Book Publishing in Kurdish language in Syria	12
2.1 The Ottoman era (until 1918)	12
2.2 The French mandate (1920–1946)	12
2.3 Syrian state after the French mandate (1946–2006)	13
2.3.1 From 1946 to 1962	13
2.3.2 The Baath Party government (1963–2006)	13
2.3.2.1 From 1963 to 1990	13
2.3.2.2 From 1991 to 2000	13
2.3.2.3 The time of Bashar Al-Assad (the beginning of 21st century)	15
2.3.2.3.1 After the events in Qamishli	15
2.4 Print run and genres of the books published in Syria and Lebanon	16
2.5 Book Annotation	18
3. Kurdish Book Publishing in Syria and Lebanon	19
3.1 Kurdish publishers and publishing houses	19
3.2 Printing houses and printing	19
3.3 Print run	22
3.4 Book distribution and sales	22
3.4.1 Bookshops	22

3.4.2 Book distribution.....	23
3.4.2.1 Book distribution abroad	24
3.4.3 Sales	25
3.4.4 Prices	25
3.4.5 Book fairs	25
3.5 Copyright.....	25
3.6 Piracy	25
3.7 ISBN.....	25
4. Readers of Kurdish literature and libraries in Syria.....	26
4.1 Literacy in Kurdish.....	26
4.2 Libraries in Syria and Kurdish language editions	26
5. Online book publishing	27
6. Major problems and future development tendencies of Kurdish book publishing in Syria	28
6.1 New tendencies in Kurdish book publishing.....	28
Conclusion and recommendations	29
Notes	30
Sources.....	33

CONTENTS OF THE RESEARCH AND SOME TERMS

One of the states where the Kurds live is the Syrian Arab Republic. Although book publishing in Kurdish language is not allowed in Syria, the Kurds there try to publish books and periodicals in their language.

It will be useful to remind the reader of a few facts in relation to the research: in Syria the Kurdish dialect *Kurmanci* is spoken. Although Arabic is the official alphabet in Syria, when writing in Kurdish, Kurdish writers in the country use the Latin alphabet like their colleagues in Turkey.

The Kurds call the part of Kurdistan which is governed by Syria “Western Kurdistan” or “South Western Kurdistan”. In this research Western Kurdistan will mean the northern part of Syria, which is close to the border with Turkey. In this research the term Kurdish writer is used to refer to a writer who has at least one book published in Kurdish.

The Kurds in Syria

The Kurds live in the Northern part of the Syrian Arab Republic. The border between Turkey and Syria crosses a territory inhabited by Kurdish people. There are separated Kurdish families, living on the two sides of the border.

The ratio of the Kurdish population to the whole population of Syria is estimated between 8,5 % and 10 % **(1)**. Since the population of Syria was 17 980 000 **(2)** in 2004, according to the estimations, the Kurdish population is between 1 528 000 and 1 798 000. Most of the Kurds live in the northern regions called Cizîr (Cezire), Çiyayê Kurmênc (Kurddax) ve Eyne'1-Ereb, as well as in Aleppo and Damascus **(3)**.

Syria used to be a part of the Ottoman Empire but it was occupied by the English and the French in 1918 at the end of the World War I. In 1920 the governing mandate was transferred to France. This mandate lasted until 1946. Syria became an independent state in 1946.

In 1962 an extraordinary census was carried out in the region of Haseke, inhabited by Kurds, and 120 000 Kurds, representing 20 % of the Kurdish population in Syria, were deprived of Syrian citizenship under decree # 93. This practice attracts attention as being peculiar to Syria. Since then these people have been treated as foreigners (“acnabi”, plural - “acānib” in Arabic) and in fact they are not citizens of any country. In Syria they are given cards identifying them as acnabi.

This discrimination against Kurds is part of the policy of Arabization. Although they live in Syria, “acānib” cannot buy property, vote or be

elected; they do not have passports and therefore cannot travel abroad. Marriages between them or with representatives of other ethnic groups are not considered to be legal. That is why their children cannot exercise a number of civil rights. In 1996, according to Kurdish sources the number of “acānib” was 200 000. The number stated by the Syrian government for Human Rights Watch, was 67 465 **(4)**. It is supposed that the number is now 300 000 **(5)**.

Another part of the Kurds in Syria is the so called group of the unregistered (in Arabic “*maktumin*”). They do not even receive the red cards of the “acānib” Kurds. In 1996 the number of “maktumin” reported by the Syrian government was approximately 75 000 **(6)**, and it is estimated as 100 000 today **(7)**. The children of these people are discriminated in various ways. For example, their access to education is limited. According to Human Rights Watch “maktumin” are discriminated in terms of education and on legal and ethnic grounds **(8)**. About the pressure exerted on the Kurds in Syria, one of the Human Rights Watch’s reports reads as follows: “various bans on the use of the Kurdish language; refusal to register children with Kurdish names; replacement of Kurdish place names with new names in Arabic; prohibition of businesses that do not have Arabic names; not permitting Kurdish private schools; the prohibition of books and other materials written in Kurdish” **(9)**.

According to the same report “books and other materials written in Kurdish do circulate in Syria, but at considerable expense for the Kurdish groups that arrange to have them printed. One intellectual explained: Kurdish songs, folklore, and stories are not allowed to be printed as books. We print these secretly and pay printers many times over [the regular prices] to print them. We have a cultural association in Beirut. Its main purpose is to publish books in Kurdish by Kurdish and other authors on Kurdish issues. We bring these books in and distribute them in Syria. In Damascus and Aleppo, certain bookstores will buy these illegal books from us and sell them. They buy them from us because they know that they will sell.

European diplomats noted in 1994 that ‘possession of Kurdish books is tolerated, although the distribution is very limited. Printing in Kurdish, however, seems not to be tolerated, and Kurdish books therefore are (illegally) imported from Lebanon and northern Iraq’.

Human Rights Watch asked the Syrian government if it was permitted to print books in Syria written in Kurdish and if it is legal to distribute and sell in Syria books written in Kurdish that are printed outside the country. The government’s July 1996 reply did not address these questions.” **(10)**

In response to the Turkish SKY TV journalist Serdar Akynan's question from 26 December 2005, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said that the fact that some Kurds in Syria did not have citizenship was due to a technical error and that these Kurds would be granted Syrian citizenship. However, they have not received it yet (June 2006).

1. KURDISH WRITERS AND BOOK PRODUCTION IN SYRIA

Some Kurdish writers have written and published books in their language in Syria even under these difficult conditions. I will try to explain how this is accomplished at various stages.

1.1 An impeded mother tongue

It has been already stated that the usage of Kurdish language is hampered in different ways such as creating difficulties for education in Kurdish language in schools, for publishing books, periodicals, audio and video cassettes with songs in Kurdish, and even speaking Kurdish in institutions. **(11)**. Publishing books and magazines in Kurdish was permitted during the French mandate but when Syria became an independent state, it started to be hampered.

1.1.1 Writing in spite of the regime's pressure

The Kurd Huseyîn Huznî Mukriyanî, who was born in Eastern Kurdistan (in Iran), is the author of the first book in Kurdish published in Syria. Later Celadet Bedirxan wrote and published a few books in Kurdish in Syria in the 1930s. He is also famous for having prepared the Kurdish alphabet based on the Latin alphabet. His books were written and published in this alphabet. Until that time the Arabic alphabet had been used. The alphabet used by Celadet Bedirxan has spread to Western and Northern Kurdistan (in Syria and Turkey) and is still in use. Celadet Bedirxan published his books under the name Hawarê Library (Kitêbxana Hawarê) in Damascus in the 1930s. He also published the books of his brother Kamiran Bedirxan and some other books in Kurdish, about 10 small books altogether – collections of poems, alphabet books and religious books. Among the publications was a translation, the first translation into Kurdish published in Syria. So, the pioneers of Kurdish literature in Syria are the Bedirxan brothers. They were opposed to the Turkish government and had left Turkey due to political reasons.

The authors of the five books published in Syria in the 1940s had emigrated from Northern Kurdistan. The poems of one of them – Cîgerxwîn - was distributed to Western and Northern Kurdistan, traveling from hand to hand, and they were learned by heart and copied. Thus, the works of writers who had come from Northern Kurdistan went back north again. These appealing poems inspired many people to write and read in Kurdish. A significant work published in this period is the love epos *Mem û Zîn* written in 1695.

A grammar book prepared by Reşîdê Kurd was published in the 1950s. In 1955 Osman Sebrî and a few of his friends founded the *Society for*

Reviving Kurdish Culture in Damascus – Komela Vejîna Çanda Kurdî. One of their objectives was to teach Kurds to read and write in Kurdish. **(12)**.

Up to this point the books I have mentioned were books of verse, alphabet books and religious books. The first book of fiction was published by Cîgerxwîn, and after him Osman Sebrî wrote a few prose books in the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1957 the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (PDK-S), illegally founded in Syria, secretly started to publish Dengê Kurd newspaper in Kurdish in the Latin alphabet. The importance of Dengê Kurd was its publication as a periodical as well as its political content. Nuredîn Zaza, who was a chairman of the party for some time, wrote in his memoirs that a few works in Kurdish were also published secretly at the time **(13)**. Selah Bedreddîn, one of the future leaders of the party, stated that although he was very young at the time, he participated in the secret cell activities of the party where members were instructed to read the alphabet book by Osman Sebrî **(14)**.

In the 1960s and 1970s it was totally impossible to publish books in Kurdish in Syria. During these 20 years only two books appeared in Beirut, written by the Kurdish writers Ekrem Cemîl Paşa (with the pseudonym C.P.C.) and Cîgerxwîn. I must mention here Muhemmed Enwer Eli's dissertation on the famous Kurdish epos Mem û Zin, presented at the university of Qedîs Yûsif in Lebanon in 1972 **(15)** because until then no dissertation had been written on Kurdish literature at an Arab university.

Due to the fact that publishing of periodicals and books was not illegal during the French mandate until 1946, their publishers, printing houses and the city of publication were known. This situation changed later and the oppressive circumstances forced the Kurdish writers to publish their books either in Lebanon (Beirut) or in Damascus, indicating Lebanon as place of publication.

Until the 1980s all writers of Kurdish books published in Syria came from Northern Kurdistan. For the first time in the 1980s there were, among the authors published, young local authors born in Western Kurdistan in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the 1990s the number of young local authors grew and this is the most fruitful decade from the view point of publishing and writing. This came as a result of the activities carried out earlier in Western Kurdistan as well as from the increasing links with the Kurds in Northern and Southern Kurdistan (Iraq). Other important factors are: the activities of political parties in Western Kurdistan, communications development, TV programs in Kurdish, the usage of oral and written Kurdish language in all fields after the liberation of the Kurds from Saddam's regime in Southern Kurdistan, Kurdish book publishing in Europe. It is also important that some Kurds educated abroad came back to Syria in the 1980s and paid great attention to the importance of the Kurdish language. Some magazines in Kurdish

were published; Kurdish language courses for Kurds were organized **(16)**. In the second half of the 1980s some folklore and art groups created new dynamics in literature. The most famous group was Xanî (Koma Xanî). It was founded in Aleppo in 1988 by the poet Mihemed Hemo and its activities were organized by a committee of five members. In 1992 after a short interruption it resumed its activities. Xanî also organized the Festival of Kurdish Poetry (Mehrecana Helbesta Kurd) on 22 October, the anniversary of poet Cigerxwîn's death. This date was announced as the day of Kurdish poetry in Syria.

While among the writers from the previous generation there are a lot of clergymen, most of the fifty odd authors published in the 1990s are local authors born in the 1950s and 1960s and there are few clergymen. In the same period two women writers were published for the first time – Diya Ciwan and Keça Kurd.

At the beginning of 2000s the books of many new writers were published. However, on 12 March 2004 clashes between the Arabs and the Kurds took place during a football game in the town of Qamishli. According to Kurdish sources forty people, mostly Kurds, were killed during the suppression of the clashes which had spread to other towns. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 25 people were killed, hundreds of Kurds were wounded and arrested. **(17)**. Under such oppressive circumstances, only four writers were able to publish Kurdish books that year.

There were only eight women among the writers in Western Kurdistan. However, in spite of the big difference in their populations, the number of female writers in Western Kurdistan is greater than that of Northern Kurdistan.

More than one third of the writers in Western Kurdistan are from Qamishli and the rest are from other towns, mainly Efrîn and Heseke.

The use of pseudonyms is very popular among Kurdish writers, especially in Western Kurdistan. My research indicates that at least 56 % of the 95 writers in Western Kurdistan, publishing in Syria and Lebanon, use pseudonyms **(18)**. This must be due to the potential risk of prosecution **(19)**.

Here are some statistics about writers, publishing in Syria and Lebanon (1925-2006):

	Number of writers
<i>Writers in Western Kurdistan</i>	95
<i>Writers who are not from Western Kurdistan</i>	28
total	123
<i>22 of those 123 are not alive any more.</i>	

These 95 writers from Western Kurdistan are:

	Number of writers
<i>Now in Western Kurdistan (Syria)</i>	47
<i>Outside Syria</i>	20
<i>Dead</i>	7
<i>With unknown location</i>	21
<i>The 28 writers who are not from Western Kurdistan are from:</i>	
<i>Northern Kurdistan (Turkey)</i>	15
<i>Southern Kurdistan (Iraq)</i>	7
<i>Eastern Kurdistan (Iran)</i>	1
<i>Not Kurds</i>	5

1.2 Translators

In Western Kurdistan there are very few translations published. The woman writer Keça Kurd stands out as the translator of the highest number of books. There are no publishers to pay for translations so they are made for free, voluntarily.

1.3 Proofreaders, layout and cover designers

Proofreading, **layout** and cover design are usually done by amateurs – by the authors or their friends. That is why they are usually of low quality.

Sometimes people pay for page-layout. For example, Mihemed Hemo says he has paid 100 USD for the layout of his book **(20)**.

Many new authors ask their friends or acquaintances who are better acquainted with the writing norms of Kurdish language to proofread their books. Later on writers usually do the proofreading themselves.

1.4 Writers' organizations

Kurdish writers in Syria do not have their own organization but some of them are members of Kurd PEN whose center is in Germany. In Syria, Kurd Pen has a representation which comprises three writers: Rezoyê Osê, Konê Reş and the chairperson Bêwar Îbrahîm, a woman writer **(21)**.

1.5 Literature days, commemoration gatherings, contests and awards

In recent years Kurds have started organizing poetry-reading days called Kurdish Poetry Festivals in Syria. The festival was organized by Koma Xanî for the first time in 1993. 97 of the people who had been invited gathered at Mihemed Hemo's home in Aleppo on the night of 21 October 1993. 21 of them were poets who read their poetry for the audience. The next day, 22 October 1993, the same group organized Kurdish Poetry Festival in Efrîn.

About 150 people took part. The following year this festival took place in Efrîn, Qamishli, Aleppo and Dêrika Hemo on 22 October **(22)**.

These poetry festivals are organized in secret. They take place in basements or in the open air, in a pre-planned place. Although few in number, women poets and Arab poets of Syria also participate. The participants receive written or oral invitations. During the 7th festival in 1999 the security services interrupted the event and dispersed the participants. Different methods were used to avoid authorities' interference. For example, the printed invitations for the 8th festival in 2000 announced Damascus as the location of the event, while the participants were orally invited to actually come to Aleppo. Then the police arrested the organizers and interrogated them. The number of poets taking part in the festival differs each year. For example, the 11th festival which took place in 2003 was attended by 58 poets **(23)**.

In some years, as in 1992, the Day of Kurdish Journalism is celebrated on the 22 April in the towns of Qamishli and Aleppo **(24)**. In 2006 the Day of Kurdish Journalism was marked in different places in Western Kurdistan masked as "folklore gatherings" or "culture groups". In Qamishli, a seminar was organized on the same occasion on 22 April 2006 **(25)**.

Commemorative meetings are organized to celebrate Kurdish writers who have passed away such as Celadet Bedirxan, Cigerxwîn, Osman Sebrî and Rewşen Bedirxan **(26)**. Such gatherings, like the one in Aleppo attended by 30–40 people, are held in secrecy **(27)**. The participants would be invited orally or over the phone. At present, there are still such "culture" groups in Western Kurdistan **(28)**.

Recently, the interaction between the Kurdish writers living in different parts of Kurdistan has shown significant development. For example, writers living in Western Kurdistan take part in conferences, seminars and festivals organized by the municipalities and cultural institutions in Northern and Southern Kurdistan.

The Kurds have managed to organize some contests and grant awards under these difficult conditions. For example, in March 1992 Gelawêj magazine held a poetry competition **(29)**. In 1993 a Kurdish short story contest was organized **(30)**.

In 1996, 1997, 1998 Xanî group organized three poetry and two short story contests. 40–50 poems and 12–15 stories were received. The announcements were published in Kurdish magazines and newspapers. Even people from Northern (Turkey) and Eastern Kurdistan (Iran) took part. The winners received 5000 Syrian Pounds (96,2 USD), second prize – 3000 Syrian Pounds (57,7 USD), third prize - 1000 Syrian Pounds (19,3 USD) **(31)**.

A poetry prize is also given at the Kurdish Poetry Festival which has been carried out annually since 1993.

Another award, named after the poet Osman Sabri is given to people of non-Kurdish origin who have helped the Kurds in some way. This award has been distributed annually since 2 February 1999 **(32)**.

Konê Reş, Seydayê Tîrêj and Dilawerê Zengî from Western Kurdistan are among the recipients of some of the cultural and literary prizes that have been awarded in 1990s and 2000s in Southern Kurdistan **(33)**.

Monetary prizes, books, or the bound volumes of back issues of periodicals, a card or a small gold plaque are awarded to the winners.

2. BOOK PUBLISHING IN KURDISH IN SYRIA

According to my findings, the total number of books published in Kurdish until 2006 is 220.

2.1 During the period of the Ottoman Empire (until 1918)

According to Kurdish sources, in 1914 Huseyn Huznî Mukriyanî bought a printing machine in Germany and transported it to Aleppo in 1915, where he started using it. In 1925 he moved it to the town of Rewandiz in Southern Kurdistan. It was the first printing machine in Southern Kurdistan owned by a Kurd (34). Although some sources state that a book by Huseyn Huznî Mukriyanî (35) was published in Kurdish in Aleppo in 1916 and that magazines such as *Kurdistan*, *Çiyayê Kurmanc*, *Botan*, *Diyarbakir* (36) were published by his printing house, this information has not been confirmed (37). I have not found a Kurdish book printed in Syria during the Ottoman times.

2.2 During the period of the French mandate (1920–1946)

During the period of the French mandate, education in Kurdish language at the schools in Syria was not permitted but publications in Kurdish were not banned. The first Kurdish book published in Syria was written by Huseyn Huznî Mukriyanî (38) in the South Kurdish dialect (*Mukri*), in 1925. Books in the *Kurmanci* dialect started getting published only in the 1930s.

After the Turkish Republic was established, some Kurdish intellectuals and politicians left the country and settled in Syria. One of them was the aforementioned **Celadet** Bedirxan, who started publishing the *Hawar* magazine in the Latin alphabet in Damascus in 1932 prior to publishing books in Kurdish. Although the magazine stopped coming out in 1935, it began to be published in 1941 during the II World War and was published until 1943.

Another magazine, *Ronahî*, was published by Celadet Bedirxan in Damascus between 1942 and 1945, and his brother Kamiran published two newspapers in Beirut - *Roja Nû* (1943–1946) and *Stêr* (1943–1945).

The books of the famous poet Cîgerxwîn were published in Syria in the 1940s for the first time.

During the World War II radio *Levant* in Beirut, which was under French rule, broadcasted in Kurdish but in 1946 these emissions were stopped (39).

2.3 During the period of the Syrian state after the French mandate (1946–2006)

2.3.1 Between 1946 and 1962

14 books in Kurdish were published in Syria and in Lebanon in the period between 1946 when Syria became an independent state and 1959. Some of them were poems of the Kurdish poets of the classic period, Ehmedê Xanî and Melayê Cizîrî, others were the works of the writers Cîgerxwîn, Osman Sebrî û Reşîdê Kurd from Northern Kurdistan.

2.3.2 During the period of the government of the Baath Party (1963–2006)

2.3.2.1 Between 1963 and 1990

Baath Party, which came to power in March 1963, continued implementing the previous policy of Arabization of the Kurds. The Arab Belt plan (al-Hizam al-'Arabi) which started in 1962, was further elaborated in 1963 and published by the director of the political police, Muhemmed Teleb Hilal. This plan targeted to separate the Kurds on the two sides of the Syrian–Turkish border. The implementation of this plan necessitated the creation of an Arab “belt”, **375** km long and 10-15 km wide, where Arabs from the inner provinces of the country would be moved to replace the Kurds living along the border, and Kurds would be relocated inland **(40)**. The plan envisaged measures preventing Kurdish access to education and work, aiming to force the Kurds to leave the country, and to deprive those who did not speak Arabic of civil rights. The Syrian policy towards Kurdish language is regarded to be a typical example of linguicide **(41)**. In the first decade of Baath rule in Syria not a single book in Kurdish was published.

Although the legislation was not changed during the implementation of this plan, the situation improved a little after 1976, when president Hafaz al-Assad’s rule slackened the severe measures taken against the Kurds . For example, he abandoned plans for shifting parts of the population between different regions. **(42)**. He did not get on well with Baath, which was in power in Iraq, and he had problems with Turkey. Thus Hafaz al-Assad’s government was trying to keep relations with the Kurds opposing their respective regimes in Iraq and Turkey on a relatively friendly basis. **(43)**. As mentioned before, books of **local** writers from Western Kurdistan were published for the first time in the 1980s.

2.3.2.2 Between 1991 and 2000

Some Kurdish writers in Western Kurdistan say that the Syrian regime treated the Kurds with more tolerance for a while after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 although there were no legislative changes **(44)**. This fact, together with the development of the Kurdish national movement in

Southern and Northern Kurdistan, and the growth of the number of Kurdish periodicals in these regions and in Europe had a positive influence on book publishing in Syria and Lebanon in the 1990s. For example, 3 books were published in the 1970s, 20 - in the 1980s, and 111 - in the 1990s. What is more, new genres like memoirs and biographies appeared in the 1990s.

The Bedirxan brothers published the first periodicals in Syria and Lebanon between 1932 and 1946. Then, no other periodicals in Kurdish were published for more than 10 years. Later on, the newspaper *Dengê Kurd*, published illegally by the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, marked the beginning of the second period of periodical publication in Kurdish. This was an important step but after the party split into two in 1965, the newspaper continued to appear in Arabic **(45)**.

If we leave aside the *Agahî* magazine, published annually by photocopying by the writer Mele Hesenê Kurd (Hesen Hişyar) on his own for 19 years, from 1966 to 1984 **(46)**, the second period of silence was broken in 1968 when *Gulistan* magazine was published. It was edited by the poet Cîgerxwîn and published by duplication too. Whereas *Dengê Kurd* was a political newspaper, *Gulistan* was a cultural and literary magazine. In 1979 another literary and cultural magazine, *Gelawêj*, was started. These three periodicals were published for 11 years by political parties. Other periodicals published in Kurdish by political parties are *Stêr* (1983–1993), *Xunav* (1986–1995), *Roja* (1991), *Newroz* (1995), *Deng* (1995) **(47)**.

The first periodical in Kurdish in Syria, independent from politics, after the Bedirxan brothers' publication, was *Gurzek Gul*, which started being published in 1989 and stopped in 1992. Then there were other literary and cultural periodicals like *Zanîn* (1991–1997), *Aso* (1992), *Pirs* (1993), *Hêvî* (1993), *Delav* (1995), *Xwendevan* (1995) **(48)**.

Most of these periodicals are not published any more. As far as I know, the newspapers and magazines which are published in Syria as of 2006 are: *Gulistan*, *Pirs*, *Newroz*, *Jîn*, *Roj*, *Azadî*. The first three are in Kurdish, the others – in Kurdish and Arabic. Of these, *Jîn*, *Roj*, *Azadî* are the titles of two different publications each (two *Jîn* etc.) **(49)**.

It is obvious that periodicals which are published illegally face many difficulties. For example, their publishers cannot write an address for communication. I found such an “address” in *Zanîn* magazine **(50)**:

Adress of Zanîn:

Syria - Kamechli - P. O. Box ()

The name of the town was written but not the number of the P.O.Box.

The publishers of *Gelawêj* magazine state the following: “Due to some reasons we cannot write the address of the magazine, that is why we do not have P.O.Box, telephone or fax to communicate with readers and authors.

Communication is in the hands of friends and distributors of the magazine. (...) In spite of the hardships, we hope that through devotion, the magazine will go on being published in this contemporary design. Otherwise, the editors of *Gelawêj* will have to replace the computer with paper and return to the [old] unpleasant form” (51).

2.3.2.3 The time of Bashar Al-Assad (the beginning of 21st century.)

Bashar Al-Assad came to power in 2000. The Legislative Decree concerning printing and distributing books was published at this time. This decree makes it obligatory for owners and directors of printing houses to register and fill in forms in order to be allowed to publish and distribute their books. Those who publish without permission are sanctioned. For example, one famous printing house was shut down for printing a Kurdish dictionary without a permission,. Many bookshops selling books without permission were closed, too. That is why some printing houses, which used to print Kurdish books, have stopped doing so. A Kurdish writer says the following: “Kurdish publishing was not allowed in the past but we managed to print our books by paying more money. However, after this decree, printing houses refuse to do this even for greater payment because they risk serious punishment.” (52). The same writer also says: “We have no choice but to go to Southern Kurdistan or abroad (Europe and Istanbul). Our language is forbidden in Syria and printing is expensive here” (53).

Those who apply to the ministry for official permission to print books in Kurdish, do not get it. For example, the writer Mihemed Hemo says he has addressed the ministry with such a request without success (54). So, publishing books in Kurdish is even more difficult now.

2.3.2.3.1 After the events in Qamishli

As I have already stated, after the collisions between Arabs and Kurds in Qamishli on 12 March 2004 and during the period of oppression afterwards only 4 books were published. This is the lowest number of books published annually in Syria and Lebanon after 1990.

As some Kurdish writers say, that year the police increased the pressure exerted on owners of printing houses. Some of the owners who had agreed to publish Kurdish books for higher payment than usual did not dare to do that any more. In the past, especially in the 1990s, the control was not so strict, the police used to sometimes close their eyes. According to a writer, after the events in Qamishli a change occurred in the attitude of many owners of printing houses towards the Kurds. They say: “You, the Kurds, are with the Americans. You want to divide our country.” According to the same writer “the regime made the image of the Kurds worse in the eyes of the Arabs” (55). This is something new.

Tyranny inspired fear among the Kurds and at times they had to burn Kurdish publications themselves. A poetess says: “When the Kurdish rebellion in 2004 reached Efrin, the state authorities started searching houses. They searched for „evidence“ against people. That is why my family burned 200 of my collections of poems which were stocked at home”.

2.4 Print runs and genres of the books published in Syria and Lebanon

As I have already mentioned, for fear of punishment and to mislead the police, printing house owners and writers state Lebanon (Beirut) as the country of publication in most of the Kurdish books published in Syria. In actual fact there are very few Kurdish books printed in Lebanon (Beirut). That is why presented below is the sum total of the books published in Syria and Lebanon in order of the publication dates:

Books in Kurdish published in Syria and Lebanon (1925-2006):

<i>year</i>	<i>number of the published books</i>
1925	1
1926–1931	-
1932	3
1933	2
1934–1937	-
1938	4
1939	1
1940–1941	-
1942	1
1943	-
1944	1
1945	1
1946	-
1947	1
1948	2
1949	1
1950–1952	-
1953	1
1954	2
1955	-
1956	4
1957	-

1958	2
1959	1
1960–1971	-
1972	1
1973	1
1974	-
1975	1
1976–1979	-
1980	1
1981	-
1982	2
1983	1
1984	2
1985	5
1986	1
1987	4
1988	3
1989	1
1990	7
1991	14
1992	12
1993	12
1994	6
1995	15
1996	11
1997	10
1998	15
1999	9
2000	7
2001	5
2002	11
2003	9
2004	4
2005	15
<i>Books with unknown year of publication</i>	7
total	220

This is a classification of the books published in Syria and Lebanon according to their topics and genres:

<i>poetry</i>	112
<i>short stories</i>	20
<i>folklore</i>	14
<i>children's books</i>	12
<i>memoirs</i>	3
<i>novels</i>	2
<i>biographies</i>	2
<i>alphabet primers</i>	11
<i>history books</i>	5
<i>religious (not poetry)</i>	5
<i>dictionaries</i>	4
<i>textbooks, teaching aids</i>	3
<i>grammar books</i>	3
<i>spelling books</i>	2
<i>others</i>	6
<i>books with unknown topics</i>	16
total	220

It is obvious that more than half (50,9 %) of the publications are of poetry.

As far as I have found out, 9 are translations and 6 of them are translations from Arabic. There are at least 6 books that are transcribed from the Arabic to Latin alphabet.

2.5 Book announcements/reviews

Book announcements in Kurdish can be found in magazines and newspapers published by Kurds or on their websites. Brief information about publications with book covers or lists of newly published books as well as interviews with Kurdish writers can also be found there. There are neither paid announcements to advertise a book nor book catalogues.

3. KURDISH BOOK PUBLISHING IN SYRIA AND LEBANON

3.1 Kurdish publishers

As an exception, only a few Kurdish books have received permission for publication and distribution in Syria. Apart from them, there are no official publishing houses or publishers of Kurdish books. With the exception of the aforementioned books, Kurdish books bear either no name of publisher or the names of publishing houses which do not officially exist. Most of the books state Beirut as place of publication instead of Syria, so it is impossible to find out which ones were printed in Lebanon and which ones in Syria. On some Kurdish books, I have found the names of the following publishing houses:

<i>publisher</i>	<i>number of the books published in Kurdish</i>
<i>Ararat</i>	1
<i>Dar Betra</i>	1
<i>Dar All-Hassad</i>	5
<i>Dar el-Katib el-Erebî</i>	1
<i>Pirtûkxana Bedirxan</i>	5
<i>Weşanên Hoşeng Kurdaxî</i>	5
<i>Weşanên Kovara Aso</i>	3
<i>Weşanên Kovara Zanînê</i>	5
<i>Weşanên Kovara Zevî</i>	3
<i>Weşanên Merx</i>	2
<i>Weşanên Navenda Celadet Bedirxan a Rewşenbîrî</i>	5
<i>total</i>	36

As seen above, *Weşanên Kovara Aso* (Publication of Aso Review), *Weşanên Kovara Zanînê* (Publication of Zanîn Review) and *Weşanên Kovara Zevî* (Publication of Zevî Review) derive their names from the Kurdish reviews.

On four books in Kurdish I found the following names of printing houses:

- Çapxana Firroke,
- Çapxana Kerem,
- Metbe'etu'l-Ixa,
- Metbe'etu'l-Cahiz.

Some of these printing houses are real, others are not. For example, there is no printing house called Firroke (Çapxana Firroke).

3.2 Printing houses and printing

Printing and publishing books in Syria is regulated by Legislative Decree #50 (in Arabic "al-mersum al-taşri'i") of 22 September 2001.

According to article 6, owners and directors of printing houses have to register everything printed there in order of the date of publication with titles, authors and print run. They have to present them to administrative and juridical authorities upon request. According to article 7 publishers have to give to the Ministry of Information (Wezaretu'l-I'lam) copies of books on the day of publication. All these copies have to be accompanied by information on titles, authors, translators, print runs. Obviously these copies are needed for censorship and for controlling if the publications are identical with the manuscripts presented to the Ministry of Information prior to publication. For the book he wishes to publish, the publisher needs to get permission from the Ministry of Information. Six copies of the manuscript of each book must be sent to the Ministry of Information. The time necessary to receive permission varies according to the book. It may take from one week to six months **(56)**. Some Kurdish writers say these formalities are skipped when a Kurdish language book is in question! Books in Kurdish are blocked at the stage of addressing the Ministry of Information. Together with the requirements stated above, publishers have to enclose a written summary of the contents of the book in Arabic. The Ministry of Information usually does not reply to applications for publication of Kurdish books. If the request is very pressing, the Ministry's response is received months later, it aims to get rid of the problem and states that "the book is not appropriate" or "we do not have an expert with knowledge of Kurdish language to evaluate books in Kurdish ". Kurdish writers or publishers know this and look for illegal ways to print their books to avoid the trap of these „legal“ procedures. Although there is no law to ban printing and publishing books in Kurdish, in reality, the Ministry does not grant them permission. All Kurdish writers I have spoken to say that in Syria lots of laws are solely on paper and are not applied. One of the writers describes the situation in this way: "Law is understood here in the following way: what contradicts the policy of Baath, the party in power, is banned, and what does not contradict is allowed. For example, a man can stay in prison for years before going to court. We play "cat and mice" with the authorities but we are the ones who always suffer. State officials can decide not to apply the law. That is why when a new law is adopted in Syria, people say: "Hear but don't foster any hope." **(57)**.

As I have already stated, there are a few writers who have received official permission to publish their Kurdish books. I have found about ten books that were officially published in Syria. Most are either children books or books containing folkloric texts and most t are bi-lingual - Kurdish with an Arabic translation. The authors say that at the time a Kurd was working at the Ministry and he managed to get permission for these books. Thanks to him they were printed legally and could be sold in bookshops (for example in Damascus, Aleppo, Qamishli, Amûde, Dêrik and Tirbespî) or sent abroad by post.

With the exception of books printed with permission, books in Kurdish are printed illegally in printing houses or photocopied, binded and distributed. The „print run“ of photocopied books is usually smaller. For example, Mihemed Hemo, who has published books of other Kurdish writers as well as his own, says he has photocopied and sold approximately 40 different titles of books and magazines. He has produced 15, 20 or 100 photocopies of each of them. When the print run is sold out, he makes more photocopies. For example, the collections of poems by *Cigerxîn* reached a „printrun“ of 500 copies, all issues of *Hawar* magazine have a print run of 130 photocopies. He also produced some issues of *Çiya* and *Nûdem* magazines by photocopying (58).

Another writer who has published or helped publish many books in Kurdish illegally since 1985 told me that he had been interrogated many times by the police and continued: “In 1985 I met the owner of a printing house in Damascus. He liked the Kurds very much. He agreed to print books in Kurdish secretly and actually printed lots of books, magazines and newspapers in Kurdish. I was sending books to Aleppo, Qamishli, Hisîça, Amûde, Dêrik, Serêkanî. A few years later, at this printing house, I met a Kurd who was working for the police. In less than ten days rumours about the printing house began to circulate and it was shut down and its owner had to bribe the police to avoid prosecution. I was arrested after a few months of life in the underground. The police confronted me with the owner of the printing house. Thank goodness, the man said he did not know me and that he saw me for the first time, so I was released (...). I did not make money from the books but I went on publishing them. My goal was to preserve and distribute Kurdish books, to aid the development of Kurdish culture. I was not thinking about profit and loss” (59).

Authors say that some people help them financially, paying for the printing of books but there are only a few such cases.

The offset printing expenses for the three books published in 2005 by Dilawerê Zengî (60) can illustrate the printing costs of Kurdish books in general:

number of pages	print run	printing costs
216	200	20 000 Syrian Pounds (385,2 USD)
200	200	16 000 Syrian Pounds (308,2 USD)
100	300	20 000 Syrian Pounds (385,2 USD)

In the Syrian cities populated by Kurds there are no printing houses – they can be found in Damascus and Aleppo. Most of the books in Kurdish have been printed in Damascus and some in Aleppo. On some of the books the name of the city of Qamishli is written but they have usually been photocopied(61).

Books in Kurdish printed in Syria do not usually contain any pre-publishing technicalities such as footnotes, indexes and the like.

3.3 Printrun

The printrun of 36 books which I managed to find out after asking their authors is as follows:

printrun	number of books
40	1
100	2
150	2
200	4
300	5
500	6
600	1
800	1
1000	12
1500	1
2000	1
total	36

It is obvious that 12 of the 36 books (33,3 %) have a print run of 1000 copies, and 6 books (16,7 %) have a print run of 500 copies. The printrun of books in Kurdish usually varies from 40 to 2000 copies. Let me remind for comparison that the printrun of books in Arabic published in Syria is usually 1000 **(62)**.

The first editions of 23 of the books in Kurdish with printrun mentioned above, have been sold out.

I have not managed to find any information on the printrun of periodicals. In a copy of *Gelawêj* magazine published in 1992, it is written that the printrun is 2500 and that it is distributed in Çiyayê Kurmênc (Kurddax), Kobaniyê, Cizîr (Cezire), Aleppo and Damascus **(63)**.

3.4 Book distribution and sales

3.4.1 Bookshops

The number of books that can freely be sold in bookshops is limited with the few books in Kurdish that have official permission for publication. In the 1990s in some Kurdish-owned bookshops books without a permission were secretly sold. For example, in Aleppo, many books were sold in the *Xanî* bookshop owned by Elî Cefer and in *Bedirxan* bookshop (Mektebetu Bedirxan) owned by Mihemed Hemo. Elî Cefer settled in Germany later.

Here is the story of the poet Mihemed Hemo:

“When I had a bookshop in Aleppo, the police would often come and search it. They arrested me in 1995. The police tortured me and wanted me to work for the Syrian intelligence, to collect information for them, working

in Kurdish parties like Partiya Hevgirtina Gelê Kurd or Partiya Yekitiya Demokratiya Kurd. They said that if I accepted I would receive a salary. I refused. Two of my teeth were broken during torture. After that I stayed in a very bad military prison without standing trial. Before that the police had caught two Kurds in Lebanon with books on Kurds. They were brought to the same prison and stayed there for seven months. When they got to know I had to do with books too and that I was caught with 700 books, they felt sorry for me! They told me: “If two people stay in prison for 7 months each because of two books, for 700 even if the grandsons of your grandsons stayed in prison, you would still be in debt to the state!

In 1997 my bookshop was shut down because I was selling books in Kurdish. In 1999 I was arrested again. This time I was accused of printing books. After staying in a single cell for 25 days, I spent another 6 months in prison. One of the officials told me, „Your crime is very serious. There are ten illegal Kurdish parties in Syria which demand cultural rights but you actually practise your rights. You are applying in practice what they want in theory!”

In 2000 I was arrested again and I stayed in for 3 days. In spite of the pressure, each time I went out, I kept on opening the same bookshop and selling books in Kurdish. Finally, when the police arrested me again in 2001, they claimed that the bookshop serves Zionism. Then I realized the situation was getting worse and when I was released, I went to Southern Kurdistan. A few days later I talked to my wife on the phone. She told me the police had searched our house and confiscated all my belongings - books, CDs, pictures and manuscripts. They were looking for me. They said if I did not return, they would take her away. A few days later, they broke into the bookshop, and took away everything - all the books, the computer and the fax machine. My friends I talked to on the phone advised me not to go back to Syria because I would get a severe sentence. And I remained in Southern Kurdistan. Other Kurdish writers such as Nasir Hemsoro and Siyabend Brahîm have also stayed in prison in Syria.” **(64)**

Mihemed Hemo also said that illegal Kurdish books sell better than the ones that have permission.

Nowadays, there are two other Kurdish bookshops in Qamishli - Bedirxan and Ciwan.

When books are sold in bookshops, the bookseller receives a 40-50 % discount when there is a cash payment, and 10-20 % in case of consignment **(65)**.

3.4.2 Book distribution

Book distribution also needs authorization from the Ministry of Information. Alternative ways to distribute Kurdish books are sought when an authorization is not obtained. For example:

- Authors distribute and sell their books on their own.
- Authors distribute and sell their books with the help of friends and acquaintances without paying to them.
- Some authors distribute their books with the help of Kurdish folkdance groups. Sometimes part of the profit (about 25 %) goes to the ensemble, sometimes groups help voluntarily.
- Some illegal Kurdish parties also help with the distribution and selling of books whose authors are their members or supporters.

Sometimes authors do not sell but give away books to friends, children and cultural institutions. The number of copies distributed this way by the writers I have interviewed varies from 25 to 400.

In the 1980s and the 1990s lots of Kurdish language courses were organized among the Kurds in Syria. They were not officially allowed and were mostly attended by children and youngsters. Some Kurdish writers state they have given away hundreds of books to students of these courses and to folk groups. Sometimes such courses were organized by writers.

Nowadays books in Kurdish are not sent by mail because it is risky. In the 1930s and the 1940s it was possible to send Kurdish books abroad. For example, it is clear from the published archive of *Hawar* magazine that its owner, Celadet Bedirxan, subscribed lots of people to it, and distributed it on a large scale - to Lebanon, Egypt, USA, Iraq, Iran. Celadet Bedirxan was trying to send it to many cities where Kurds lived, especially in Iran and Iraq (66).

A writer who lives in Europe at present shared with me the following, "In the 1990s from time to time *Zanîn* and *Aso* magazines and the books published with them were mailed from Syria. An official at the post office was bribed to close his eyes to the fact Kurdish editions were being sent under different names. A poet called Ferhad Çelebî just barely got away from trouble when he tried to send a magazine by post. He had decided to send the *Zanîn* magazine to the Kurdish Institute in Paris and he was interrogated and got sworn at. In 1992 when we published the 21st issue of *Stêr* magazine, a friend from Qamishli, called Abbas, took five copies of the magazine to Qamishli. Being an engine driver we thought he would not be searched. Unfortunately, the police in Aleppo confiscated the magazines and tortured him. He was paralyzed and still limps (2006)" (67).

3.4.2.1 Distribution abroad

Writers from Western Kurdistan say books in Kurdish can not be sent out of Syria for sale. A few copies can be sent as presents to friends, other writers or institutions in Northern Kurdistan, Lebanon and Jordan via people travelling there. A few books are mailed from Beirut post offices.

3.4.3 Sales

Except one, all the writers in Western Kurdistan that I have interviewed say that the sale of their books is not well organized and does not cover their printing expenses **(68)**.

3.4.4 Prices

According to a research in 2005 the average price of books in Arabic printed by private publishers in Syria is 5,71 USD **(69)**. According to my findings, the average price of books in Kurdish published in the same year is 75,83 Syrian Pounds (1,5 USD).

3.4.5 Book fairs

From time to time Kurdish parties or individuals have organized secret book fairs in Aleppo and Qamishli, selling books about Kurds and Kurdistan both in Kurdish and in Arabic. Mihemed Hemo, organizer of such a book fair, says that in 1994 at an exhibition organized in an empty house in Aleppo, he presented 370 books. On the first day of the fair, with the help of the illegal Kurdish parties, lots of books were sold. However, on the second day the police raided the house, beat him up and confiscated the books.

3.5 Copyright and copyright fee

Until 2001 Syria was not a signatory of any international agreement on copyright. On 27 February 2001 Act #12 on copyright protection was adopted (Qanûnu Himayetu Huqûqu'l-Muellif). It protects a writer's copyright during his lifetime and for 50 years after his death **(70)**.

Kurdish writers in Syria publish their books on their own and there is no copyright. The writer Dilawer Zengî says some time after his marriage he sold his furniture and invested the money in publishing his first collection of poems. "Everybody here knows this story", he says, "because this happened five months after we had got married, my wife got angry and went back to her father's house. Two months later we made up." **(71)**.

3.6. Piracy

From time to time, books by authors living abroad or some deceased writers' publications have been reproduced by photocopying and distributed in Syria without the knowledge of the copyright owner. People who do this say they do it taking risks, not for profit but out of patriotism.

3.7 ISBN

Syria is not included in the ISBN system, so most books published in Arabic or Kurdish do not have ISBN. Some publishers get it from Lebanon **(72)**.

4. READERS OF KURDISH BOOKS AND LIBRARIES IN SYRIA

I have not come across any readership survey regarding books in Kurdish in Western Kurdistan.

4.1 Literacy in Kurdish

Although multiple Kurdish dialects are spoken in Northern, Southern and Eastern Kurdistan, *Kurmanci* dialect is the only one used in Western Kurdistan. As mentioned earlier Kurdish writers in Western Kurdistan use the Latin alphabet. Although there are no definite numbers, Kurdish politicians and writers I have spoken to have stated that as Arabic is the official alphabet in Syria and is used at all levels of education, the number of Kurds who can read and write in the Latin alphabet is very small.

4.2 Libraries in Syria and Kurdish publications

In 1984 the national library in Damascus (El-Mektebetu'l-Weteniyye) named El-Esed (El-Mektebetu'l-Esed) was found, and Syria entered the system of the legal deposit. According to article 17 of its statute, arranging the norms of the legal deposit, five copies of each publication published by Syrians in Syria or abroad, are sent to this library **(73)**.

Kurdish writers from Western Kurdistan I talked to said that except for a few Kurdish – Arabic dictionaries in the El-Esed Library they had not found other Kurdish publications in Syrian libraries.

5. E-PUBLISHING

Internet came to Syria in 2000 but it plays an important role for writers and readers living in Western Kurdistan. Thanks to the Internet they can read writings of Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan and from other countries and publish their works online. On some Kurdish websites there are PDF files with texts of writers from Western Kurdistan.

One ought to remember that the percentage of Internet users is lower in Syria than in the rest of the region. According to a research there are 4,3 % Internet users in Syria, whilst in Lebanon it is 13,4 %, in Jordan – 10,4 %, in Israel – 45,8 % **(74)**.

These are some of the websites of Kurds from Western Kurdistan I have managed to find out:

Internet address	language
http://www.amude.net	Kurdish
http://www.avestakurd.net	Kurdish
http://www.tirej.net/link.htm	Kurdish
http://www.tirbespi.com	Kurdish and Arabic
http://www.welateme.net	Kurdish and Arabic
http://www.keskesor.info	Kurdish and Arabic
http://www.binxete.net	Kurdish and Arabic
http://www.amude.info	Kurdish, Arabic and German
http://www.efrin.net	Kurdish, Arabic and German
http://www.rojava.net	Kurdish, English, German, and Arabic
http://www.kurdo.org	Kurdish, Arabic and Swedish
http://www.knntv.net	Kurdish, and Arabic, English (Internet Tv)

The following websites contain texts of books in Kurdish published in PDF files:

- <http://www.amude.net/epirtuk.html>
- <http://www.efrin.net/kurdi/e-pirtuk/index.htm>
- <http://www.geocities.com/kmehname/pirtuk>

The above websites “amude”, “efrin” offer 21 and 14 books respectively and “geocities” has 144 articles and books.

6. IMPORTANT PROBLEMS AND FUTURE TENDENCIES OF DEVELOPMENT OF KURDISH BOOK PUBLISHING IN SYRIA

The most important problem of Kurdish book publishing in Western Kurdistan lies in the obstacles created by the authorities and mainly in the absence of official permission for publishing. That is why Kurdish publishing seeks illegal ways to exist and the problems of printing, distribution and marketing cannot be solved.

6.1 New tendencies in Kurdish book publishing

Many of the Kurdish writers from Western Kurdistan communicate with Kurds and Kurdish writers from other parts of the world by email. Step by step the number of the Kurds who are using the Internet grows. They have the opportunity to read PDF files of books published on websites. Lots of websites have Kurdish dictionaries. This influences the development and standartization of the written language.

Obstacles and censure in Syria urges writers there to turn to the Internet. I think the interest in the Internet will grow and the number of websites publishing texts in Kurdish and books of writers from Western Kurdistan will increase.

In the past, books and magazines published by the Kurds in Syria were mostly in Arabic but recently the number of books in Kurdish has grown. Earlier there were very few people writing in Kurdish but nowadays hundreds of people do it. In spite of all the difficulties, there is a tendency to increase in the number of Kurdish writers as well as the publications in Kurdish. This and the possibilities on the Internet will lead to an increase in the reading of Kurdish books written in the Latin alphabet and of using it for writing although the Arabic alphabet is still the official alphabet.

If the oppression continues, Kurdish writers will publish their books abroad, especially in Lebanon, Southern Kurdistan and Turkey as often as they can. The increase in the number of Kurdish books printed in Southern Kurdistan, and the TV programs in Kurdish appearing recently will influence the writers and readers in Western Kurdistan further.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As long as the policy of linguisticide towards the Kurdish language continues in Syria, as long as there is no education in Kurdish at schools and there is no freedom for Kurdish publications, writing and publishing in Kurdish will be limited as few people will take the risk to break the law. Although e-publishing is possible, few readers can make use of it . Still, there are things which can be done under these conditions.

Recommendations

- A central Kurdish IT School for e-learning of Kurdish can be created.
- A Bibliography of Kurdish publications can be prepared.
- A Kurdish readerhip survey can be carried out.
- More reviews about books of writers from Western Kurdistan can be published in Kurdish newspapers, magazines and broadcasted on TV outside Syria.
- Digital Kurdish library can be published online and existing websites offering texts from books in Kurdish can be developed further.
- More reviews about books of writers from Western Kurdistan can be published on existing Kurdish websites.
- More digital newspapers and magazines can be created.
- More reviews about books can be published on existing digital newspapers and magazines.
- As it is not allowed in Syria, Kurdish institutions abroad can award successful poems, short stories, novels of writers from Western Kurdistan and publish them.

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- (36) Celîl, Dr. Celîlê, *Jiyana Rewşenbîrî û Siyasî ya Kurdan*, Weşanên Jîna Nû, Uppsala, 1985, p. 110-112
- (37) On 26 April 2006 I asked Kurdistan Mukriyanî about this book – she is the niece of Huseyn Huznî Mukriyanî and chairperson of the Kurdish Academy. She also said that she has not seen the book in question and has no information about it.
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- (72) Meiering, op cit, p. 60
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B) People whom I met or talked to on the phone

Brahîm Mehmûd (writer)

Dilawerê Zengî (writer)

Konê Reş (writer)

Kurdistan Mukriyanî (writer)

Mihemed Hemo (writer and owner of a bookshop)

Seadeddîn Mela (politician)

Selah Bedreddîn (politician)

C) Writers whom I communicated by email

Ahmed Ali

Arşevê Oskan

Axîn Welat

Meşal Temo

Rezoyê Osê

Tengezarê Marînî