"Does Naturalization Matter?":
Socioeconomic Mobility and Political Participation of the Kurds in Lebanon

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Citizenship is broadly defined as "A status of full and equal membership in a self-governing political community that entails rights and obligations and is supported by certain virtues." Bauböck gives also a narrower definition stating that "citizenship boils down to ‘nationality’, i.e. a formal affiliation of persons to states" (Bauböck 2002: 4). Granting a citizenship is considered to be a sovereign function; thus becoming a citizen of a polity is a double act, one side of which is the willing applicant, and on the other side the recognition by the state. The latter ultimately holds the administrative power to endow the naturalized with the civil, political, and social rights held by any native born member of the nation state. Citizenship therefore "performs an allocative function within the politically constructed boundaries of the nation state in that it controls access to scarce resources and provides legitimacy to social hierarchies between different groups within the society" (Bachmann & Staerklé 2003: 17). Naturalization thus becomes a highly controversial issue, at the center of which is the question of whom to admit or include and whom not to admit or include. The decision will determine, in some small way, the sharing of economic and political resources among the entire population of the citizenry. It will provide legitimacy to those who are admitted, thus securing their status within the nation, and it will make ambiguous those who aren't admitted, making their existential status within the nation perpetually challengeable.

In Lebanon, as in many other countries, naturalization is a contentious political issue. Moreover, it is an issue determined partly by the country's makeup. Lebanon nobly tries to accommodate and protect the 18 or so diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic groups in a system of consocietal democracy which depends on a constitutionally determined system of sectarian equilibrium and quotas. Lebanese had
thousands of non-citizens/stateless who were without citizenship for one reason or another. However, the Lebanese government regulated the status of so many of them by issuing the Naturalization Decree No. 5247 dated June 1994. The Kurds, who immigrated to Lebanon from Turkey in the 1920s and who, in their majority, were holders of residence permits called Qayd el Dars Identification Card (Citizenship Under Study Identification Card) were naturalized. Before naturalization, the Kurds blamed their lack of social mobility on their lack of citizenship, a reasonable enough claim in a society in which employment in the public sector (which requires citizenship) is so large a factor in securing the middle class lifestyle, and in which accessing education, land ownership, qualifying for loans, and asserting rights to public services all are determined by citizen status.

In this thesis, I examine and compare the Socioeconomic Status and the Subjective Social Status of the naturalized at the time of naturalization and 15 years after in order to explore how, notwithstanding other factors, the naturalized perceive their situation pre and post naturalization. I analyze the strength of the association between citizenship acquisition/naturalization and socioeconomic mobility and political participation through Socioeconomic Status (SES) and Subjective Social Status (SSS) among 164 Kurds who were naturalized Lebanese by the Presidential Decree 5247/1994 of June 20, 1994. I also examine their political participation through voting and political partisanship in order to test the theory whether their political engagement at the beginning of the process shifted downward to a state of political apathy in the years since their naturalization, and whether there is a significant gap between them and the native-born in voting turnout.

The data of this research were drawn from a survey concerned with documenting the socio-demographic characteristics, socioeconomic mobility, and political participation of the Kurds residing in Beirut at the time of naturalization and fifteen years after naturalization. I surveyed 164 subjects who lived in various neighborhoods of the capital of Lebanon, Beirut, which is where the majority of the Kurds reside. Rather than rely overwhelmingly on descriptive statistics which often conflate analytical categories, this research construed statistical interrelationships between variables that were verified by qualitative data generated from biographical and experts’ interviews. These interviews sought to elicit a clear picture of the participants’ perspectives on the research topic. This research used mixed methodologies by employing qualitative with quantitative analysis; in other words, I mixed survey data with interviews, seeing this as the most profound form of triangulation of research methods, which would allow us to enhance the validity and reliability of the research.
findings and discover broader generalizations.

In preparation for the study, regular research was conducted including a literature review in Arabic, English and French. After this, I garnered ‘pre-field’ familiarity with the community by making contact with and holding several information meetings with the heads of Kurdish organizations and selected Kurdish journalists, as well as with socio-cultural scholars, political personalities, and people who are acknowledged to have familiarity with the situation of the Kurds in Lebanon. These meetings were coupled with visits to the neighborhoods in Beirut where the Kurds reside. Neighborhoods were identified by Kurdish key informants and Kurdish organizations. Furthermore, a flyer written in both Arabic and Kurmanji explaining the aim of the study and showing how people could participate was distributed during the Newroz Feast (the Persian New Year March 21, 2010), which is the Kurds’ most important celebration in Lebanon.

Once the sourcing was done, the contacts were made, and the questionnaire was finalized, I set out to pilot it. The piloting of the questionnaire yielded positive outcomes and increased my confidence that my research plan and the wide range of topics included in the study would permit an in-depth understanding of the social forces I targeted and help me attain the objectives of the research.

This survey was the basic source that provided most of my findings. The field survey was launched on 4 September and finished on 20 October 2010. In the course of it, the questionnaire was administered face-to-face with 164 subjects. In order to make sure that the survey targeted only those who were naturalized in 1994, respondents were selected while being controlled for the following variables: year of naturalization, age at naturalization, and voting registration in Beirut. The selection of the respondents was done using snowball sampling technique, which is applied mainly in two research situations. On one hand it is considered the only technique suitable for sampling populations for which there is no official information or which represent less than 2% of the population or “hidden” populations, “hard to reach populations”, and “very rare human populations” (Paspalanova 2006: 7). In other words, because of their legal status, social stigma, and the consequent lack of visibility of the members of those populations, it is difficult to identify them. Research shows that snowball sampling is applicable in a situation when the target group can only be discovered by chain referral method (Welch 1975: 239-241). In the case of identifying the Kurds in Beirut without the opportunity to use demographic data or explicit household data, we followed Welch’s procedure of snowball sampling to discover the Kurdish households from the larger population households. This technique was the most appropriate to use in the
case of the Kurds because a) Lebanon has not had a national census since 1932; b) there is no data available on the population of Lebanon including the Kurds; c) the Kurds are a marginalized group in the country because of their legal status and social stigma. The technique is based on asking individuals from an organization or group to identify and to provide contact with their friends, associates, family members, or people with whom they share a common characteristic required by the study.

During the field work, I faced several challenges of which a) the lack of cooperation of the respondents due either to a combination of lack of experience in being surveyed, lack of trust due to their experience in Lebanon; and b) the general tension in Beirut between the Shiite and Sunnites which turned into an armed conflict during the administering of the survey.

The quantitative and qualitative information obtained through the survey were instrumental in producing interesting conclusions. My research construe that a) Citizenship has more instrumental value than intrinsic when the naturalized are ‘stateless’; b) The naturalized live in fear when their naturalization is legally threatened; c) Notwithstanding other factors, naturalization improves the socioeconomic mobility and positively impacts Subjective Social Status of the naturalized; d) Naturalization of non-citizens/denizens can have positive socioeconomic outcomes for the descendants of the naturalized persons; e) Naturalization may accentuate ethnic self-identification of the naturalized; f) The patron-client system/clientelism affects the newly naturalized to the same degree as it affects the native-born; g) Naturalized citizens’ votes can no longer be ignored; h) When the naturalized vote in higher number than the native-born, an inverse ‘nativity gap’ occurs; and i) Government integration policy matters to reduce the marginalization of the naturalized and to incrementally incorporate them into the social, economic and political life of the host society.