

# KURDWATCH●Report 2

## The 'Amudah cinema fire of November 1960



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# The 'Amudah cinema fire of November 1960

The 'Amudah cinema fire of November 13, 1960, in which several hundred Kurdish schoolchildren were burnt to death, is an event that is constantly mentioned in relation to the history of discrimination against the Kurdish population in Syria. It has either been alleged that the Syrian government deliberately started the fire in the cinema to kill the children<sup>1</sup> or been suggested that whoever was responsible for the incident was influenced by anti-Kurdish sentiments.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere it has been stated more cautiously that the local population accused the Syrian authorities of arson and that the case was never solved.<sup>3</sup> This article makes use of eyewitness accounts and newspaper articles from November 1960 in an attempt to reconstruct what happened in the 'Amudah cinema. It furthermore explores why the events were interpreted as described above.

Scores of schoolchildren went to the 'Amudah cinema on November 13, 1960, where the Egyptian horror film »The Midnight Ghost« was showing. The backdrop for the children's visit to the cinema was Algeria's struggle for independence from France (1954–1962). Syria was holding a solidarity week in support of Algeria, in the course of which the population was urged to collect as many donations as possible to aid its »Algerian brothers«. The director of the subdistrict of 'Amudah ordered that all elementary school pupils in 'Amudah attend the above-mentioned film, the proceeds of which were to be donated to the struggle in Algeria.

Several screenings of the film took place on the day of the fire. The cinema was said to be packed out at

**1** See »Ein dringender Appell um das Schicksal des inhaftierten syrischen Kurden Dauod Hussein«, accessed at <[http://www.humanrights.de/doc\\_de/archiv/s/syria/Appell dauod\\_250501.htm](http://www.humanrights.de/doc_de/archiv/s/syria/Appell dauod_250501.htm)>.

**2** See Montgomery 2005: 42; McDowall 1998: 17.

**3** See Tejel 2009: 48.

each performance. Although it had a total of only two hundred seats, five hundred children were present in the cinema for the final screening.<sup>4</sup> Most of them were huddled together on long benches. Others had to stand. The film projector, which had been in operation all day, overheated and caught fire. Flames swept towards the ceiling—made of wood, straw and clay, and roughly two meters away—and from there spread throughout the entire cinema.<sup>5</sup> According to eyewitness accounts, the material that lined the walls of the cinema contributed to the spread of the fire.<sup>6</sup>

When the cinema began to burn, the children panicked and tried to escape. The north and south sides of the cinema had two narrow doors—according to information from the Egyptian magazine *al-Musawir*, they were two meters high but only eighty centimeters wide. Besides, they opened inward. As the children tried to flee, many of them stumbled and fell, blocking both exits. Others continued to push from behind so that the doors could not be opened either from inside or outside, leaving the children trapped in the building. The only window in the cinema also proved to be a death trap. Many of the children who attempted to escape this way fell into the well located below the window outside. Several drowned, others were injured.<sup>7</sup> Although a city of roughly 14,000 inhabitants at the time, ‘Amudah had no fire department. Fire engines from the cities of al-Qamishli and al-Hasakah had to be called in and consequently arrived behind time at the scene of the disaster.<sup>8</sup>

So much for the events. Apart from rumors,<sup>9</sup> there is no concrete evidence that the fire and subsequent catastrophe was anything other than an accident caused by inadequate safety measures. Lack of escape routes and the overuse of technical equipment were presumably not confined to the cinema in ‘Amudah but likely to have been a common shortfall of cinemas and other public institutions throughout Syria. The continued allegation of the Kurdish population—along with Syrian-Kurdish parties—that the fire was a targeted attack on the Kurdish people can primarily be attributed to three factors. The first was the political situation at the time. When Syria joined Egypt to form the United Arab Republic in 1958, the anti-Kurdish policies that had be-

4 See Nami 2000: 72.

5 See Nami 2000: 72.

6 Interview with the survivor Dr. Sededîn Mele (Stockholm), November 10, 2008.

7 Interview with the survivor Zinar Şêxmus (Berlin), November 12, 2008.

8 Interview with the survivor Dr. Sededîn Mele (Stockholm), November 10, 2008.

9 According to these rumors, the Syrian government started the fire. Cited as evidence is the fact that the doors of the cinema were said to be barred from the outside, that the employees had allegedly left the cinema before the fire broke out and that the police supposedly hindered the residents of ‘Amudah from rescuing the children because it was too dangerous. For more on this, see Tejel 2009: 151, who summarizes the rumors, which he attributes to local sources.

gun under Adib ash-Shishakli in the mid-1950s were sustained. Thus it was forbidden to play Kurdish music in cafés, for example, or to print, even possess, Kurdish publications. Additionally, in August 1960, only a few months before the fire, the leaders of the executive committee of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan in Syria (KDPS), located in Aleppo, were arrested and tortured, the party structure was exposed, and five thousand people were detained and interrogated. The party leadership was accused of separatism and eventually sentenced to prison. In light of these circumstances many believed that the Syrian government might also have taken direct action against the Kurdish people. The Arabization measures implemented in 1962 and 1963 in particular—the stripping of thousands of Kurds in al-Hasakah province of their citizenship and Muhammad Talab Hilal’s Twelve-Point Plan—did not help to dispel this suspicion. On the contrary, these measures made it seem that much more probable. The second relevant factor is the absence of a thorough investigation of the incident and the fact that no one was held responsible for the deaths of the children. Although all three cinema operators, Xidir Ezîz, Silêman Remedan and Ehmed Hesenat, and their staff, Ehmed Ibrahîm, Mihemed Mehmud and Ehmed Şerîf, were arrested after the fire, they were soon released.<sup>10</sup> The third factor that fuels the population’s suspicions about the ‘Amudah cinema fire is the ongoing ban on any public commemoration of those who died in the fire.

The exact number of victims is unknown. Kurdish sources estimate at least 283 to 300 dead.<sup>11</sup> On November 15, 1960, the Egyptian newspaper *Akhir Daqiqah* refers to 200 dead and 450 injured. Most of the latter were seriously injured, some later succumbed to their injuries.<sup>12</sup> The Egyptian magazine *al-Musawir*, on the other hand, refers to 180 dead and 121 injured.<sup>13</sup>

The victims of the cinema fire are buried in the same area of ‘Amudah cemetery. Some of the names on the gravestones can still be identified today, while others are no longer decipherable. The names of those buried in mass graves, for example, have never been listed. The names of the dead as identified from the gravestones are as follows:<sup>14</sup>

**10** Interview with the survivor Dr. Sededîn Mele (Stockholm), November 10, 2008.

**11** For more on this topic see, for example, Dr. Ebdulbasit Seyda, »Sînema Amûdê çima şewitî?«, November 18, 2000, accessed at <<http://www.amude.net/sinema/basit.html>>.

**12** See Nami 2000: 81.

**13** See Nami 2000: 72.

**14** The list of names (and the date of birth in some cases) stems from November 2004. It was compiled by Dijwar Naso and first published in the article »Navên hin goriyên şewata sînema Amûdê«, accessed at <<http://www.amude.net/sinema/nav.html>>. We present the data in its published form.

1. Ehmed Ebdilhadî
2. Mihemed Mesum Xelîl (born 1950)
3. Ednan Mecîd Ezîz
4. Mihemed Yasîn Esed el-Rîbat (born 1951 in Damascus)
5. Zuher Ebdilezîz Ebdilqadir Derwîş
6. Mehmud Ismaîl Remo
7. Mihemed Saleh Mihemed Yûsiv (1950)
8. Ibrahîm Mihemed Yûsiv (1946)
9. Fehed Şêxmûs (1949)
10. Emîn Bengo (1953)
11. Ibrahîm Silêman Bengo
12. Ehmed Ferhan
13. Mihemed el-Hac Mehmûd
14. Mihemed Salih Silêman
15. Ezîz Mihemed Emîn Reşwanî (1948)
16. Ibrahîm Emîn Reşwanî (1948)
17. Ibrahîm Hecî Îsa (1949)
18. Mihemed Silêman Mercî (1948)
19. Nurî Mihemed Sebuhe (1947)
20. Mehî Mihemed Emîn Kalo (1946)
21. Xorşîd Mele Sîrac (1950)
22. Emîn Selfîc Emîn
23. Hesên Hac Mihemed
24. Mihemed Saleh Şêxmûs Mihemed Kurdî
25. Ehmed Ebdilrehman Deqorî
26. Ibrahîm Ebdilrehman Deqorî
27. Mihemed Hecî Ismaîl Hiso (1946, 5th grade)
28. Mihemed Seîd Deqorî (1928)
29. Mihemed Reşad Mehmud Beşar (1948)
30. Mihemed Xalid Şêx Ebdilrezaq el-Bancî
31. Nurî Hecî Hisên (1950)
32. Necmeldîn Ebdilkerîm Seyid Necim
33. Ehmed Mihemed Elî Hiso (1948)
34. Ibrahîm Temo Umer (1950)
35. Salih Xelef
36. Xidir Şêxmûs Zeyf
37. Mihemed Yûnis Zeyf
38. Tariq Şerîf Xelîl (1954)
39. Mihemed Saleh Xelîl (1947)
40. Mihemed Zekî Şêx Musa
41. Remedan Mihemed Elî
42. Ebdilselam Mihemed Saleh Elhac Elî Elkermî (1951)
43. Hisên Ehmed Elkermî

44. Ismaîl Şukrî Rezo (1948)
45. Mihemed Izedîn Elebasî
46. Ibrahîm Mihemed Elî
47. Ehmed Mele Newaf (1950)
48. Mehmud Nezîr Axa (1950)
49. Memduh Nezîr Axa (1948)
50. Sebrî Şukrî Elî
51. Elî Şêxmûs Celo
52. Şêxmûs Ibrahîm Berazî (1946)
53. Ebdilrezaq Ebdilxelîl (1949)
54. Ebdilezîz Ebdilxelîl (1946)
55. Derwîş Mecîd Debax
56. Umer Ebdilhelîm Debax
57. Zuhêr Ehmed Hisên (1946)
58. Ebdilsemed Şêx Tewfîq el-Huseynî
59. Subhî Elî Mihemed
60. Umer Elî Mihemed Elo
61. Fêsel Mistefa Tauus
62. Elî Mele Sîrac Mele Mihemed (1948)
63. Ebdo Hecî Umer Tauus
64. EbdoEhmed Tauus
65. Faris Seîd Hesên
66. Remedan Hesên (1946)
67. Subhî Ehmed Mihemed Remedan (1952)
68. Saleh Felemez
69. Umer Sofî Ferec
70. Mehmgd Hecî Mistefa
71. Ehmed Hemo Helqa
72. Ebdilrezaq Ibrahîm Kermî
73. Hisên Mihemed Kermî
74. Ehmed Mihemed Kermî
75. Mihyedîn Zekî Eljac Qasim
76. Izedîn Ebdilkerîm
77. Mihemed Hecî Xelef (1947)
78. Mehmud Hecî Xelef (1952)
79. Meesum Hecî Ezîz (1945)
80. Mihemed Ebdilcelîl Mele Ibrahîm
81. Sîrac Umer Şêxmûs (1946)
82. Ebdilrehman Osman
83. Ebdilîlah Şêxmûs
84. Mehmud Hecî Silêman
85. Fuad Dawid Şêxmûs Hefskê
86. Fewzî Elî Şêxo

87. Celal Hesen el-Umerî
88. Ebdilezîz Mehmud el-Umerî (1948)
89. Ebdilqehar Mehmud el-Umerî (1946)
90. Ebdo Ehmed Mihê Silê
91. Şêxmûs Elhac Têlo
92. Meruf Silêman Ibrahîm
93. Yihya Elhac Mihemed
94. Cemîl Mele Ebdilkerîm Mele Ehmed
95. Ibrahîm Mele Ebdilkerîm Mele Ehmed
96. Hisên Hecî Mihemed

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