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The Political Function of Religion in Kurdish and Perso-Iranian Nationalist Confrontations after the 1979 Revolution

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Abstract

During the early years (1979–1982) following the 1979 revolution, because of the prevalence of a traditional society, religion was politically more functional. Religious discourse became hegemonic and most groups, including secularists, were forced to use such a discourse to promote their politics. The Persian politicians used Islam to make Perso-Iranian nationalism dominant over others, while non-Persian politicians appealed to it to gain their ethno-national rights. Using *Qualitative Content Analysis* to analyse the scattered texts of speeches, interviews, messages of the Persian and Kurdish leaders published in different publications at the time (which are available in some archives and databases), this article describes how they use religion in their confrontations. The findings show both marginalisation and resistance against it appealing to Islamic discourse. Ignoring those parts of Islam that are not in their interest, the Persian nationalists use Islamic brotherhood and unity to reinforce Islamic identity over Kurdish identity in order to marginalise the Kurdish nationalist movement, as well as to mobilise ordinary people against the Kurdish forces. Conversely, the Kurdish nationalists resist, and demand equality as Muslim brethren. In this regard, while religion has uniting, mobilizing and legitimating functions for the Persian government, enabling it to pursue nationalistic aims and to justify relevant measures, it also partly has a legitimating one for the Kurdish opposition.

Keywords

Kurdish nationalism – Perso-Iranian nationalism – Islamic identity – marginalisation – resistance – legitimisation – mobilisation

1 Introduction

Religion, whether structurally or culturally, remains an important social factor. The intertwining of religion and politics has always been a salient topic of study and one of the most controversial social issues throughout modern history. Despite the growth of secularism and having autonomous state and religious institutions in many countries, the separation of religion and politics has been virtually impossible. Both are omnipresent. As Friedland mentions, “[m]odern societies are composed of a plurality of distinct, yet interdependent, institutions.”¹ Indeed, politics is a public and broad arena covering state and non-state institutes. Even the institution of a secular democratic state is separate, independent and impartial in order to defend all individual and group rights. Thus, in such societies religion cannot always be in the private sphere, sometimes it needs taken into politics even though the state is still secular. Politics is related to a common space that all individuals and social groups, including religious ones, can participate in to safeguard their rights. They are not prevented from participating if there is democracy and they accept the democratic rules. Thus, religion has a function and role in the politics of both Western and Eastern societies, even in secular liberal democracies. In this regard, the political function of religion in nationalistic confrontations, especially in the Middle East, is important.

According to Nottingham's three models of society, including a society in which religious values predominate, a society in which there is a combination of religious and secular values, and a society in which secular values prevail,² the Middle East including Iran and Kurdistan is among the second model of society. Because of the influence of religion among the masses, both secular and religious politicians, especially nationalists, reflect upon its function for their aims. The conundrum here is why and how politicians, including the

1 R. Friedland, 'The constitution of Religious Political Violence: Institution, Culture, and Power', in J. C. Alexander, R. N. Jacobs and P. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (Oxford university press, 2012), 429–470, p. 442.

2 E. K. Nottingham, *Religion; A Sociological View*, (Random House INC., New York, 1971) pp. 32–34.

secular, use religion, while the relevant socio-political issue basically is not religious. For instance, the ethnic and nationalistic confrontations that are related to socio-political rights: in this regard, studying the relationship between religion and politics in Eastern Kurdistan (hereafter Rojhelat) can help in examining the problem.

The quasi-modern state³ of Iran during the Pahlavi regime was politically secular from its emergence in the 1920s; although based on the Mashrooteh Constitution of 1906 it was a Shiite state. Apart from general religious policies, the use of religion against opposition, especially non-Persian ethno-nations, was insignificant. Its politics in the ethno-national regions were mostly based on military power. The dictatorship of Pahlavi Shahs and their liberalist politics paved the way for clergies, as a very influential stratum of society, to join the protests against the regime. Finally, the protests led to the 1979 revolution. Unlike the Pahlavi regime, the new regime covered its Perso-nationalistic politics under Islamic ideology.

During the revolution, various revolutionaries included religious, secular, leftist, religio-national, and ethno-national forces. Despite the importance of secular and non-religious forces, the presence of a religious leader and a traditional society paved the way for religious forces to quickly predominate in the revolutionary wave. A religious discourse became hegemonic in the political space so that most of the secular forces, and even anti-religion parties such as the communist party Tudeh, followed the religious leaders and parties and found themselves with them on the same front against imperialism. In such space non-Persian forces were also forced to justify their demands in accordance with the hegemonic religious discourse.

As a Middle Eastern country, Iran can be considered as a multi-national or non-nation state.⁴ Although many efforts have been made to form one Persian/Fars nation-state by force, there are still different stateless ethno-nations which pursue their political rights. During the revolution, Turks, Turkmens, Kurds, Balouchis and Arabs, as the five largest non-Persian ethno-nations, tried to gain their rights. Conversely, the government used any way it could to suppress their ethno-national demands. There was an intense contrast between dominant nation and dominated nations. The secular and religious forces

3 The Middle Eastern states do not have some of the criteria of modern states. Therefore, they are called by the author 'quasi-modern states.' In this regard, see S. Mofidi, and S. Rahmani, 'ISIS and Modernity; Studying the Effect of Middle-eastern quasi-modern States', 13:2 *Research Letter of Political Science*, Journal of Iranian Political Sciences Association (2018) pp. 157–186.

4 About non-nation state, see A. Razaat, *Kurdistan in Iraq; The Evolution of a Quasi-state* (Routledge, New York, 2018).

of both parties resorted to religion and the religious discourse to resolve the ethno-national issues. In the present article, the focus is on the Perso-Iranian and Kurdish nationalists to show how both of them have used religion in their confrontations. In this respect, it tries to answer the following question: How did religion function in the Kurdish and Persian nationalist confrontations during the early years (1979–1982) following the 1979 revolution when parts of Rojhelat were under the control of Kurdish forces? At the time there were confrontations and clashes between the Iranian government and the Kurdish forces under the leadership of Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI/H-DKA) and Komele.⁵

In what follows, this article first gives a short conceptual/theoretical overview on the political function of religion and its difference from other similar concepts such as political religion. Then, it explains the ideological political changes during the 1979 revolution to show how the Perso-Iranian ideologues and leaders use Islam and Shiism for nationalistic purposes. After explaining the methodology, it presents the findings of the research under two main categories; marginalisation and resistance appealing to Islamic discourse, which shows how Islamic discourse is used by the Iranian regime to marginalise and suppress the Kurdish forces, and similarly how it was employed by Kurdish forces to resist the regime. Subsequently, it discusses the inferred political functions of religion in the confrontations to mobilise the people and their forces against each other. And, finally it concludes with the effects of the functions on both parties.

2 Political Function of Religion

Although public (church/mosque) religion is indeed related to the spiritual world not politics, politicians use it according to their interests and for their benefit, while they can also be driven by religious beliefs. In this way, it affects the political culture. In the interrelation and interaction between politicians and society, or religious people and politics, the relationship between religion and politics is shaped. The knowledge of politicians, especially the realist and pragmatist ones, about the influence of religion in their society leads them to

5 The Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan, known as Komele, founded in 1978. For more information, see S. Mofidi, 'The Left Movement and National Question; From Romanticism to Realism (With a Focus on Komala Organisation)', 3:1 *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* (2016) pp. 20–48.

use it in politics. Beyond the religious meaning, they often have a functional and instrumental view. Thus, religion finds a political function.

Religion, however, has both substantial and functional descriptions: in this study, the latter is taken into consideration. In this regard, whether as one of the social institutions or part of culture, it fulfils some social needs, including a political one. Therefore, function of religion means what religion as a social phenomenon or element does and what it contributes to the survival and maintenance or demolition of human societies and groups. In the other words, religion “may not only sanction structure but also its opposite, anti-structure.”⁶ Thus, according to some neofunctionalists like Merton, Alexander, Colomy, Levy and so on, it has positive/eufunction, negative/dysfunction or maybe non-function. Moreover, as a belief, it has latent function and as an institution has manifest function.⁷ In this regard, the ‘political function’ is considered as the “entailing practices that satisfy political needs of the political institutions including parties, government, etc.”⁸ Accordingly, ‘the political function of religion’ is what religion does in politics.

Segmentation and disintegration, being barriers to social change, and a cause of war and violence have been mentioned as negative aspects of the political function of religion. Religion has a positive political function in political participation (mass politicisation and mobilisation, political parties, pressure groups, elections and voting behaviour), symbolisation and ideologisation, integration, solidarity and political order, centralisation of power, legitimation, revolution, maintaining power and government, international relations and so on.⁹ Based on societies and the political situation, however, the political function of religion has changed during history so that its negative function in a society or for a group might be a positive one for others, especially in conflict between different groups.

It should be noted that the political function of religion is different from political religion, whether in the Apterian sense in relation to modern ideologies¹⁰ or in relation to public religion, although they are related to each other. While political religion appeared in the modern age, there has been a relation between politics and religion, as well as the political function of public

6 M. Schoffeleers, and D. Meijers, *Religion, Nationalism and Economic Action; Critical Questions on Durkheim and Weber* (van Gorcum, 1978) p. 48.

7 S. Mofidi, *The Political functions of religion in contemporary India (Hinduism and Islam)* (Swastik Publications, New Delhi, 2015) pp. 23–24.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 29–36.

10 D. E. Apter, ‘Political Religion in the New Nations’, in C. Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States; the quest for modernity in Asia and Africa* (Macmillan, London, 1963) pp. 57–104.

religion, from ancient times.¹¹ So, related to the function, the second sense of political religion, especially political Islam because of the engagement of Islam with politics from the beginning, is more important in traditional societies. Indeed, the real political religion emerged after the 1979 revolution in Iran. It led to an increase in the political function of religion in this country.

3 The 1979 Revolution; the Ideological-Political Changes

3.1 *The Merge of Ideologies*

As Islam, along with Arabism, has been seen as one of the important factors of Arab nationalism,¹² Shiite Islam, along with Farsim, has been an important part of Perso-Iranian nationalism before and especially after the 1979 revolution. It has had function for the relevant political systems. Indeed, Perso-Iranian nationalism has also been a religious nationalism based on Shiism. Unlike Perso-Iranian nationalism, religion has not been a column of Kurdish nationalism, and its discourse has often been secular, although religion has also had a role in Kurdish movements. However, Persian leaders during the revolution and then in their Perso-Shiite government have used hegemonic Islamic discourse, religious ideology, Islamic groups and ideological cleavages, especially between the secularists and Islamists, against the non-Persian ethno-national movements, especially the Kurdish movement in Rojhelat.¹³

According to Mehdi Bazargan, (1907–1995), from the Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI)¹⁴ and prime minister of the interim government, the Islamic revolution had two leaders: the spiritual leader, Khomeini and the ideological leader, Ali Shariati.¹⁵ Shariati (1933–1977) and Morteza Motahhari (1919–1979) were two important ideologues. Before the revolution, indeed, for solving “the problem of Shiite identity” diagnosed by Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), Shariati created “the Shiite revolutionary self-consciousness” and “the ideology that later developed into Iranian Shiite fundamentalism.”¹⁶ Shariati as a sociologist knew that Iranian societies were traditional, within which religion had much

11 See M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Tr. E. fischhoff, Methuen & Co Ltd., London, 1965).

12 See E. Kedourie, (1992), *Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1992) p. 298; and Mofidi, *supra* note 7, p. 48.

13 S. Mofidi, ‘Religion and Politics in Eastern Kurdistan (With a Focus on Maktab Qur’an During Iranian Revolution, 1979)’, 8:3 *Journal of Politics and Law* (2015) pp. 36–50.

14 A so-called Iranian pro-democracy political organisation founded in 1961.

15 J. Dehzani, ‘Nihilism and Technologies of Othering: The Kurds in Iran, Iraq and Turkey’, *PhD diss.*, (Carleton University, Canada, 2008) p. 268.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

influence. Merging Shiism, as part of Perso-Iranian nationalism, with socialism,¹⁷ he made it a revolutionary and political ideology which was used as an alternative Shiite-Islamic Ideology. Although such an idea led to the domination of religious leaders in the revolutionary wave and then led to marginalising the secular leaders, it was considered by most Persian leaders in order to preserve the centralised unitary system of the Iranian state under a Fars ethno-nation. This instrumental use of religion served the ideal Persian/Fars nation-state, and a nationalistic conception was retained.¹⁸

3.2 *Battle with Devils*

During the protests leading up to the 1979 revolution, the Pahlavi regime propagated fear of the partition of Iran and separation of non-Persian regions, especially Kurdistan. However, after the collapse of the Kurdistan Republic in 1946, the Kurdish movement under the leadership of the KDPI was revived and continued its activities against the regime. So, to preserve the dominance of the Persian ethno-nation and to continue the previous regime's politics against the various ethno-nations, the Persian opposition leaders, especially those who were religious, used Islam and the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini to integrate the ethno-national movements, including the Kurdish, into the general Iranian movement. They tried to unite different peoples by Islamic discourse against the Shah's regime and to control the situation during the revolution until the new regime was established. As advisers of Khomeini, the Persian and Persianized revolutionary leaders such as Bazargan, Yazdi, Sahabi, Banisadr, Ghotbzadeh etc. camouflaged themselves behind his leadership. Khomeini's words showed the stance and intention of the majority of them. For example, in a message on 5 November 1978, from Neauphle-le-Château, Paris, addressing 'the Muslim people of Kurdistan', Khomeini said: "Greetings to the Muslim brothers in Kurdistan who have joined the Islamic movement of other brothers by their courageous uprising and bold and brave confrontation with the devil; and have made it rough for the enemy of Islam and the country."¹⁹ Thus,

17 In his opinion Abuzar Ghafari, a follower of Prophet Mohammad, was the symbol of the socialist struggle in the thirteenth century, predating the modern Western revolutions including the socialist one. For him, Abuzar was the eminent face of Ali's Islam and way. He saw Abuzar as the necessary face for the contemporary age to realise justice and equality all around the world. In this regard, See A. Shariati, *Abuzar*, (16th edition, Elham Publication, 1392/2013) (in Persian).

18 A. Mohammadpour and K. Soleimani, 'Minoritisation of the other: the Iranian theocratic state's assimilatory strategies', 24:1 *Postcolonial Studies* (2021) pp. 40–62, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2020.1746157>.

19 R. A. Al-Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam* (The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2014), its English translation, 22 volumes, V. 4, p. 301.

the Islamic discourse became hegemonic in Iran and religious symbols such as ‘Muslim brotherhood’ and ‘the devil’ were applied to tie non-Fars ethno-national movements to the general movement and to marginalise their demands.

However, in such a political atmosphere both the Persian and non-Persian nationalist forces, whether religious or non-religious, tried to use Islamic discourse in favour of their own politics. Under the banner of defending Islam and fighting the enemies of Islam, the revolutionary Persian leaders followed their nationalist aims against ethno-national diversity. Although they had already amassed foreign support against the Shah, as the internal devil for them, after the revolution they changed the enemies of Islam from the Shah’s regime and his foreign supporters to, in their words, external enemies and their internal affiliates. Changing their politics from Muslim unity against the internal devil to unity against external devils, particularly the USA and Israel, the dominant Persian politicians used the discourse to motivate people against the opposition as affiliates to external devils while “the society did not decide itself, it looked to Mr. Khomeini’s rhetoric” in Banisadr’s words.²⁰ The ruling elite included and created many other foreign forces, especially among Shiite people, as their friends, while excluded their Iranian opposition including the ethno-national movements. Conversely, the various ethno-national movements, especially the Kurdish nationalist forces, made many efforts to defend diversity and their rights.

3.3 *Confrontations and Suppressions*

A few months after the revolution, following an election on 3 August 1979, the Assembly of Experts of the Constitution (Majlis-e Khebragan) was constituted. This became virtually an assembly of religious experts, which enacted and passed the new constitution, regardless of lawyers’ proposals to amend the draft to consider the rights of different religious and ethno-national groups, including national self-determination.²¹ It acted as a constituent assembly without the representation of different groups of society especially secularist groups, ethno-nations, and Sunni people. For instance, one of the elected representatives of the Kurds, Abdul-Rahman Qasimlou, the ex-leader of the KDPI, was not allowed to attend the assembly because of Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa

20 A. A. Faridi, ‘Abolhassan Banisadr: “Ayatollah Montazeri included Velayat-e Faqih in the Constitution,” 141 *Our Rights*, February 2021, pp. 12–14 (in Persian).

21 In a series of seminars under “the nation’s demands of the constitution” organized by the Iran Bar Association, the proposals were delineated. See Ayandegan newspaper, 28 June 1979.

against him. And some Sunni leaders like Ahamad Moftizada (1933–1993) left the assembly since their opinions about Islam, not the Shiite sect, as the official religion were not regarded. Thus, the rights of all groups other than Shiite Persians, were not considered. This resulted in enduring conflicts in some parts of Iran, especially in Kurdistan.

The above-mentioned closedmindedness led to the intensification of nationalist confrontations within which the secular and religious Perso-Iranian forces under Khomeini's leadership including FMI, Nation Party of Iran (NPI), and Islamic Republic Party, used religious discourse against Kurdish forces such as the KDPI, Komele and so on, which will be described in the following sections. Moreover, they tried to make use of the Islamic sentiments of the people and the conflict between religious and secular groups in Kurdistan, especially the Islamists and radical leftists.²² Conversely, the Kurdish forces tried to justify their movements, demands and resistance in a religious context. Against Khomeini and Shiite clergies, the Sunni Kurdish clergies, such as Sheikh Ezzedin Hosseini, defended Kurdish rights. Most of the Kurdish political groups supported Sheikh Ezzedin. Moreover, the KDPI established the Union of Religious Scholars and as a nationalist party tried to keep its contact with the Kurdish nationalist clergy.

However, using military force, the religious sentiments of the Shiite people, and social and religious cleavages in Kurdistan, the Islamic regime suppressed the Kurdish forces. On 18–19 August 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini issued two fatwas authorizing fully-fledged repression of Kurdish forces.²³ Following declaration of this holy war, he called KDPI the 'party of Satan'.²⁴ Reiterating the slogan of 'there is only one party, which is the party of God,' he denounced the Kurdish leaders, especially Ghasimlou and Sheikh Ezzedin, as enemies of the Islamic Republic, and like the leaders of other opposition parties condemned them to severe punishment.²⁵ Khomeini and other Iranian leaders and politicians

22 For instance, at the beginning they supported Maktab Quran, under Moftizada, and the Muslim Brotherhood trend to split the Kurdish forces. Attributing Sipay Rizgari (the Salvation Force), a religious/Sufi party under Sheikh Madeh Naqshbandi, to the Shah's regime and Iraqi Ba'ath regime, they also reinforced the ideological conflict between the party and left forces so that afterwards this party was disarmed by Komele and KDPI in 1980. See Mofidi, *supra* note 13; S. Mofidi, *Political Function of Religion in Nationalistic Confrontations in Greater Kurdistan* (Transnational Press London, 2022) p. 76.

23 Al-Khomeini, *supra* note 19, v. 9, p. 261 & 278.

24 F. Koochi-Kamali, 'The development of nationalism in Iranian Kurdistan', in P. G. Kreyenbroek and S. Sperl (eds.) *The Kurds; A Contemporary Overview* (Routledge, London, 1992), 171–192, p. 184.

25 Mohammadpour and Soleimani, *supra* note 18.

identified the Kurdish forces as separatists and traitors.²⁶ On 20 August, Sadeq Khalkhali, Khomeini's representative, was sent to administer the decrees in Kurdistan. He executed many Kurds arrested and suspected under 'Mofsed Fi al-arz' and belligerent ('Mohareb') to God and the Prophet.²⁷ Thus, the Kurdish parties were among the first groups to be suppressed. Nevertheless, the war between the Iranian government and Kurdish forces lasted for several years and the conflict is still ongoing. As an indication, Kurds constituted 45 per cent of Iran's political prisoners in 2018.²⁸ In this regard, in Iran there is a "high number of executions of political prisoners from ethnic minority communities after unfair trials."²⁹ In what follows, the political function of religion in Perso-Iranian and Kurdish nationalist confrontations during the early years following the 1979 revolution is examined.

4 Methodology

In this research, *Qualitative Content Analysis* (QCA)³⁰ was used in looking for references to the political function of religion in the texts of the articles, public

26 C. G. MacDonald, 'Kurdish Nationalism in Iran', in C. G. MacDonald and C. A. O'Leary (eds.), *Kurdish Identity; Human Rights and Political Status* (University Press of Florida, 2007) pp. 181–187.

27 For example, he immediately oversaw the trial of 18 anti-revolutionaries (in his words) in 24 hours and executed them in Kirmashan and Pawe/Paveh, of which nine were medical professionals charged with membership in the KDPI. See Ettlait newspaper, 21 August 1979; Jomhuri-e Islami newspaper, 22 August 1979; M. Cabi, 'The Roots and the Consequences of the 1979 Iranian Revolution: A Kurdish Perspective', 56:3 *Middle Eastern Studies* (2020) pp. 339–358, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2020.1722651>.

28 S. Akbarzadeh, Z. S. Ahmed, C. Laoutides & W. Gourlay, 'The Kurds in Iran: balancing national and ethnic identity in a securitized environment', 40:6 *Third World Quarterly* (2019), DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2019.1592671](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1592671).

29 Statement by Javaid Rehman, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, at the 75th session of the General Assembly – Item 72(c), 26 October 2020 <<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26425&LangID=E>>, visited on 20 April 2021.

30 Because of the existence of a lot of material from various and scattered sources (not fixed sources) that had to be reduced, focusing on states not process, and analysis of what the materials actually were (without considering also what there were not), QCA was used instead of Discourse Analysis (DA). In QCA, data are collected from a set of texts extracted from written, verbal or visual materials including books, newspapers, magazines, speeches, reports and interviews, social media, etcetera. In this regard, see P. Mayring, *Qualitative Content Analysis; Theoretical Foundation, Basic Procedures and Software Solution*, (Klagenfurt, Austria, 2014); M. Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*, (SAGE Publications, 2012).

speeches, messages, and interviews presented by Persian and Kurdish leaders and politicians in their nationalist confrontations during a 4-year period after the 1979 revolution. In this regard, as representative samples of Kurdish nationalist stances, the statements and viewpoints are analysed of personalities like Sheikh Ezzedin Hosseini, as the head of the Kurdish People's Negotiation Mission, as well as the main leaders of KDPI as the main Kurdish organisation which is "a national-democratic party" in Qasimlou's words³¹ and is known as such in Kurdistan.³² They represent Kurdish nationalism more than others. And, as representative samples of Perso-Iranian nationalist stances, the statements and standpoints of the supreme leader, as well as some key governmental politicians like the president, prime minister and ministers from religious and secular pro-Persian parties, are analysed.³³

The collected materials, including related texts mostly published in different newspapers, magazines and on Radio/TV, were extracted from the following databases and sources: the English translation of a book under 'Sahifeh-ye Imam' in 22 volumes including an anthology of Ayatollah Khomeini's speeches, messages, interviews, decrees, religious permissions, and letters;³⁴ 'the archive of the University of Manchester library'³⁵ including some Persian newspapers and magazines such as *Ayandegan*, *Kayhan*, *Enghelab-e Islami*, *Jomhour-i-e Islami*, *Etlaat*, *Tehran Musavvar* etc.; The archives of the documents of Iranian

31 A. R. Qasimlou, *Tavgey Heqîqet (part of the works of Dr. Qasimlou)*, compiled by Kawa Bahrami (KDPI' publications, 2004) (in Kurdish), v. 1, p. 18.

32 There have been attempts by the Iranian regime to show the Kurdish political organisations as different and separate from the Kurdish people, while it has shown the pro-Persian organisations as the representatives of all. However, the demands of different ethno-nations have to be channelised by their organisations, not the alien ones. Indeed, there are nationalistic confrontations between the organisations of dominant and dominated ethno-nations. Even by election, in a democratic space the Kurdish organisations have always represented Kurdish people. For example, apart from Sheikh Ezzeddin who had traditional legitimacy, the representatives of KDPI won in the election of the Assembly of Experts of Constitution and the first general election of Parliament (Majlis-e Shoraye Melli at the time) in the relevant constituency.

33 The leaders from secular or religious groups are considered. Secularism is here determined as separation of state and religion, not politics and religion, as well as having an impartial state, tolerance, equal opportunity, freedom and coexistence with respect to each other. So, the anti-religion and anti-nationalism groups are not considered, although under the pressure of hegemonic Islamic discourse, and the discourse of anti-Imperialism, some Persian and Kurdish leftist groups cooperate with Islamic and nationalist groups. For example, the relationship between Tudeh and Islamic Republic parties between 1979 and 1982 can be mentioned.

34 See <<http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en>>.

35 See <<https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk>>.

oppositions³⁶ including some of their publications; a Kurdish book entitled ‘Tavgey Heqîqet’ including Qasimlou’s writings, messages and speeches; and the archives of the Kurdistan newspaper.

Although a mixed approach of inductive/data-driven and deductive/concept-driven was adopted, the inductive (bottom-up) coding system was the main approach. Regarding the deductive approach, apart from the researcher’s previous ideas and using pre-existing concepts like legitimisation, integration and mobilisation etc. related to the theory of the function of religion, and prior research to discuss the findings, the texts were selected and separated firstly based on the topic or the special aspects addressing the research question, which is the relation between religion and nationalism, and its effect on the Kurdish question and movement in Iran. Thus, since there were many scattered documents, materials were reduced using the strategy of breaking down the data according to topic, instead of source. This was the first coding frame stage, which was continued with an inductive strategy to summarize the materials.³⁷

While the units of analysis were the above-mentioned texts, the units of coding were partly from the same units and partly those segments of long texts related to the Kurdistan question. To segment the materials (units of analysis) into units of coding, a thematic criterion was used. The paragraphs and sentences related to religion including Islam, Kurdish Muslims, Islamic faith and brotherhood, Quran etc. were extracted again, based on mentioning and showing the political use of religion. Here, while the issue was not religious, appealing to religious discourse and language was clearly seen. Then, the data were analysed and the coding was developed to discover and conceptualise the themes. The same and similar themes, subcategories and categories were classified. According to their interpretation and meaning, they were connected to each other and recategorized. By analysing the meaning and semantic relationship of concepts and sentences, qualitative inferences were made to understand the intentions of both parties and to understand the political function of religion for them in practice. After assessing the texts, two main categories were identified from the theoretical saturation obtained; marginalisation by Islamic discourse and resistance appealing to the discourse (see table 1). This means the common religion, Islam, provided the grounds for the state Persian nationalists to refuse and marginalise the ethno-national demands of

36 See <<https://www.iran-archive.com>>.

37 Other strategies are subsumption and adapting the steps of data analysis in grounded theory. See Schreier, *Supra* note 30, p. 88.

TABLE 1 Indicators of Marginalisation vs. Resistance by Islamic Discourse

A. Marginalisation by Islamic Discourse	B. Resistance Appealing to Islamic Discourse
<p><i>a. Reinforcing Islamic Identity</i> Emphasis on Muslim brotherhood, one nation of Islam, Islamic society, Islamic ideology and movement, obeying Islamic laws, commitment to Quran and Islam</p>	<p><i>a. Demanding Muslim Equality</i> Emphasis on recognition, the equal rights of all Muslim groups in governing, the rights of diverse people in Quran and Islam, Islamic democracy, Islamic autonomy</p>
<p><i>b. Unifying Islamism and Iranism</i> Emphasis on the army of Islam and Iran, Jihad for Iran and Islam, martyrdom for Islam and Iran, hostility to Iran and Islam, traitors to Iran and Islam, anti-Islam and anti-revolution</p>	<p><i>b. Rejection of Opposition to Islam</i> Emphasis on Muslimness, an Islamic nation, uprising to defend their rights not against Islam, the lack of anti-Islam beliefs</p>
<p><i>c. Attributing to Anti-Islam External Enemies</i> Emphasis on the Kurdish forces as devils, agents of non-Muslim America and Zionism, promoters of aberration and communism, constructors of a second Israel</p>	<p><i>c. Declaring the Shiite Regime as Anti-Islam</i> Emphasis on the regime as Shiite, anti-Sunni, Velayat-e Faqih as anti-Islam, the regime's hate of Sunni Kurds, defense as Islamic duty</p>

Kurds, as well as a base for the Kurdish nationalists to insist on ethno-national rights and resist the Islamic regime.

The reliability of the coding frame was determined across time by assessing its consistency after one month. Face validity, by comparing the coding frame with pilot coding, assessing the distribution of segments across the sub-categories in each main category, the level of abstraction of categories,³⁸ was used to determine that the categories adequately represented the concepts in the research question and also what was supposed to be measured was indeed measured. Moreover, the categories were assessed by other experts. Finally, they were described.

³⁸ See Schreier, *Supra* note 30, pp. 185–188.

5 Marginalisation and Resistance by Islamic Discourse

The findings of the research, as mentioned, showed marginalisation by Islamic discourse and resisting it appealing to the same discourse. The process of marginalising the non-Persian ethno-nations by the regime included reinforcing Islamic identity, unifying Perso-Iranism with Islamism, and attributing and labelling the opponents as hypocrites, anti-Islam and non-Muslim. It paved the way to attack Kurdish forces as enemies of Islam. Conversely, they demanded equality as Muslim brethren and rejected any opposition to Islam. In reaction to the invasion of the regime, they tried to resist it as a non-Islamic regime that claimed to be Islamic. The situation of the conflict and confrontation between Persian and Kurdish politicians is further described, based on the two main categories, under the following sections.

5.1 *Marginalisation by Islamic Discourse*

After the 1979 revolution, with the fall of the Shah's dictatorship, central power was weakened for a short time and a relatively democratic atmosphere emerged, when the Kurds, Turks, Turkmens, Balouchis and Arabs demanded their ethno-national rights. Islamic ideology and especially political Islam were not yet hegemonic. Nevertheless, the religious and secular Persian leaders under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini used Islamic discourse to support the central government and Persian nationalism against the democratic demands of different ethno-national movements, labelling them as anti-Islam separatists. The Persian leaders tied their aims to the main elements of Islamic discourse, namely Muslim brotherhood and Islamic unity. Under these banners, they reinforced the Islamic identity, then unified Islamism and Perso-Iranism, and introduced the otherness to Perso-Iranian nationalism as the otherness to Islam, which the Islamic regime claimed to represent. Thus, they motivated and mobilised Muslim people to fight against the enemies of Islam including the non-Persian ethno-national forces, especially Kurdish forces.

5.1.1 Reinforcing Islamic Identity

In Islam and the Islamic community ('Umma') all Muslims are considered as brothers based on the Quranic verse "the believers are brothers",³⁹ while it also regards their social diversity.⁴⁰ Based on this brotherhood, the Quran orders Muslims to keep their unity and not to be scattered.⁴¹ After the revolution,

39 *Quran*, Al-Hujurat, verse 10.

40 *Ibid.*, verse 13.

41 *Ibid.*, Al-Imran, verse 103.

without regarding the diversity, Persian leaders resorted to Islamic Identity to disregard ethno-national diversity in favour of Persian nationalism. While the Persians had their own rights as a dominant ethno-nation, their leaders encouraged Islamic brotherhood and unity to reinforce Islamic identity as a tool to neutralise the ethno-national demands of others. They claimed there was no difference between Muslim brothers and all groups would have their own rights in an Islamic government, so there was no need to raise such demands at a sensitive time, such that the enemies of Islam didn't want the victory of Islam and an Islamic government. Indeed, raising the banner of Islamic brotherhood and unity made the assimilation of all other ethno-national groups easier for them.

Perso-Shiite leaders of the revolution promoted Islamic identity as the broadest identity in Iran to attract, consolidate and mobilise Iranian masses for their purposes. In this regard, they mostly resorted to religious Ulama and institutions. Ayatollah Khomeini in his speeches and messages often addressed the Ulama of Kurdistan. Before coming back to Iran, on 14 January 1979 he sent a special message to the Ulama, preachers and people of Kurdistan to defend Iran and Islam against the Shah.⁴² After the revolution, in a message on 18 February 1979, Khomeini pronounced Iran's Islamic movement as "a symbol of the Shiite-Sunni brotherhood and solidarity among various ethnic groups."⁴³ In another speech on 26 February 1979, he warned Kurdistan's clergymen and Ulama "against a foreign tune of (deception) being played in Kurdistan" and asked them to "keep Islam and the Quran in mind. All should stand united and strengthen Islam."⁴⁴

In an interview, talking of their activities to connect with the Sunni Kurdish populace in 1979, Ibrahim Yazdi (1931–2017), the foreign minister of the interim government, said: "Some Islamic books such as the works of Mawlana Abu Ala Mawdoodi were translated into Kurdish, were published in Kuwait, and were distributed in Kurdistan."⁴⁵ Moreover, Persian politicians trained some Kurds to talk well in Persian just about Muslimness and Iranianness, even converting some people into Shiites, then displayed them as representatives of Kurds in different public meetings. For example, in a meeting on 30 May 1979, in memoriam of people killed in a quarrel between Turks and Kurds in Negede (Naghadeh), a convert talking in Persian introduced himself as a representative of the Kurds. Afterwards, at a meeting in Sheikh Seyyid Taha's

42 Al-Khomeini, *supra* note 19, V. 5, p. 432.

43 *Ibid.*, V. 6, p. 165.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

45 Mofidi, *supra* note 13.

house in Piranshar on 31 May 1979, with Ayatollah Rabbani Shirazi, Khomeini's representative in Kurdistan,⁴⁶ Kerim Hussami/Hisami (1926–2001), one of the KDPI's leaders asked him “where are you from? And, when were you selected as the representative of Kurds in Negede (the man was from another city, Serdest) so that you presented a speech for those victims yesterday?” Based on what he had been trained, he answered “I am Muslim and from Iran.”⁴⁷

Dividing people into Muslim and non-Muslim, the Persian leaders used Muslims against their opponents, especially ethno-nationalist forces. In their press, they even highlighted some Islamist leaders as the acceptable leaders of Muslims in non-Persian parts of Iran. For instance, they made a Muslim/non-Muslim cleavage in Kurdistan and drew attention to Ahmad Moftizada as the leader of the Muslims of Kurdistan,⁴⁸ while they labelled the other Kurdish forces as non-Muslim. In a speech, published in *Jomhori-e Islami* on 22 October 1979, talking on the Sine (Sananadaj) city council election, Abolhassan Banisadr (1933–2021), when he was a minister in the 1979 interim government, said: “...however, out of 11 elected members, eight persons were Muslims and three were from them [non-Muslim], so the Muslims won and the problem was finished...” While each of the leftists and Islamists had three elected members, and five other religious members were ordinary Muslims who had good relations with both parties, so that they supported the candidates of both parties in selecting two council spokespersons.⁴⁹ Emphasizing the religious identity of Kurds, Hashem Sabbaghian (1937-), from the FMI and former minister of interior in the interim government, in an interview published in *Ettela'at* on 7 January 1980, said: “People have not relied on them [KDPI] [...]. The Kurdish people are Muslim and we will make them aware, they are both Muslim and interested to Iran's territory.”

Finally after other messages about equality and brotherhood between various ethno-nations, without mentioning what he meant by equality, while he had already issued decrees against Kurdish forces, in a speech on 29 August 1979, regardless of the special rights and demands of the Kurds and others, Khomeini announced there is no choice for Muslim brothers but ‘living together’, which it in fact meant living under Persian domination:

46 His representative to investigate the events at the request of the KDPI. See Ayandegan newspaper, 19 June 1979.

47 See K. Hussami, *Of My Memories 1979* (in Kurdish) (Stockholm, 1992), v. 6, pp. 113–114.

48 For example, see the Banisadr's *Enghlab-e Islami* newspaper, n. 5, 24 June 1979.

49 Author's interview with Youssef Ardalan, one of the elected leftist members and one of the two council's spokespersons (another one was Fuad Rohani from *Maktab Quran*), 8 December 2021.

*In Islam race, groups, factions, language, and things of that nature are of no relevance. Islam is for all and in the interest of all. And as decreed by the Quran and Islam, we are your brethren; we are not separated from Kurds, from Turks, from Baluchis; we are all brethren and should live together. [...] There is no reason for us to fight with you. We are your brethren; we do not have any enmity toward you. In view of Islam and according to the Islamic laws, both you and we are equals. So, there is nothing to fear about, and we will publicly declare this later, too.*⁵⁰

Although the regime's authorities knew the Kurds were Muslim, and the Kurdish forces had accepted Islamic autonomy, they repeatedly announced that the Kurdish forces should be Muslim and have an Islamic government. Thus, they easily excluded them and did not regard the people's rights. For example, Banisadr announced that the Kurdish forces had to accept the regime's ideology, to be Muslim and obey Islamic laws, then the officials could give them autonomy.⁵¹ Declaring the Kurdish forces as non-Muslim, he indeed justified refusing the Kurdish rights. Whereas the Kurds, who were not only mostly Muslim and obeyed Islamic laws but also as Kurdish had the human right to self-determination, demanded autonomy. For them, it was not a conditional right to be given by alien officials.

The officials presented the regime's affiliated people and the organisation of Pishmargane Musalman, established by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), as the representatives of Kurdish people, while not accepting the real representatives some of whom, as already mentioned, had even been elected by the people such as Qasimlou, elected representative to the Assembly of Experts, and the Kurdish representatives elected to the first Parliament after the revolution. Banisadr, after becoming the first president of Iran, in a meeting with a group of Kurds gathered by governmental officials and the IRGC, said: "we cannot accept separatism and the state is ready to give a positive response to Muslim people."⁵² Indeed, such claims were made to evade the people's demands. Articulating that the alienation of Islam and Muslims in Kurdistan was intolerable to the Muslim people and Islamic Government, in another speech, he pretended "to unite a nation of Islam [...] an Islamic society within which Kurd, Turk, Arab and Fars, Chinese, Russian, European and American can live as brothers and sisters."⁵³ However, under the division of

⁵⁰ Al-Khomeini, *supra* note 19, V, 9, p. 329.

⁵¹ Jomhuri-e Islami newspaper, 16 February 1980.

⁵² See Enghlab-e Islami newspaper, n. 209, 8 March 1980.

⁵³ Kayhan newspaper, 3 April 1980.

Muslim and non-Muslim, the Persian leaders disregarded the representatives of the majority of Kurds, while provoking the Muslim mass against them. For instance, in a speech published in the Ettela'at and Kayhan newspapers on 17 May 1980, Banisadr said: "our Kurdish Muslim brothers can drive out the bullies from their own province."

All above-mentioned examples show the attempts of Persian leaders to reinforce Islamic identity against Kurdish Identity to separate the Kurdish mass from the Kurdish nationalist forces in order to weaken them.

5.1.2 Unifying Islamism and Iranism; Making a Common Enemy

The unity based on Islamic identity was used by Persian leaders to equate Perso-Shiite Iranism with Islamism. Indeed, to preserve the hegemony of this Iranism, they made it the central element of their Islamism. Thus, all the demands of ethno-nations were interpreted as being against the unity of Muslims. Labelling non-Muslim and anti-Islam indications, the Persian leaders asked the Kurdish forces to come back to Islam, otherwise they would be violently treated by Islam. They did not say they would be hounded by the Iranian regime, but by Islam, to justify and legitimate their violence. They even viewed the independence of Kurdistan from Iran as separation of Kurds from Islam. In a speech on 24 August 1979, Khomeini said:

*My dear Kurdistan brothers! My dear ones! O you who have been deceived by those mercenary leaders (of those parties). Come back to Islam. There is forgiveness in Islam; Islam belongs to everyone; Islam is the gate to blessings; come back in the lap of Islam. Take refuge in Islam. Quit those parties and those corrupt groups. Islam will treat you affectionately and treat the traitors sternly. It suppresses the traitors by swords and weapons [...].*⁵⁴

In this context, in a Friday sermon in 1979, Ayatollah Montazeri (1922–2009), chairman of Majlis-e Khebragan and then deputy supreme leader of Iran (1985–1989), said: "Kurdish brothers [...] the Democratic Party, in the name of freedom for Kurdistan, will cause you to be killed. Don't separate from Islam."⁵⁵ Moreover, in a speech, Dariush Forouhar (1928–1998), leader of the pan-Iranist and secular party of NPI, while defending Twelver Shiite as the official religion of the constitution, highlighted the Kurds as 'Iranian and Muslim'.⁵⁶ Thus, he tried to marginalise the Kurdish people's basic rights. In an interview published

54 Enghlab-e Islami newspaper, n. 55, 26 August 1979; Al-Khomeini, *supra* note 19, V. 9, p. 310.

55 Enghlab-e Islami newspaper, n. 92, 13 October 1979.

56 Enghlab-e Islami newspaper, n. 92, 13 October 1979; Kayhan newspaper, 14 October, 1979.

in Jomhuri-e Islami newspaper on 26 December 1979, also, by mentioning the Kurds as “pure Iranians and real followers of Islam”, he equated Iranianness with Muslimness and used Islam against the demands of Kurds, while accusing Kurdish organisations of “exploiting the people’s will.”

By unifying Perso-Shiite Iranism and Islamism, Persian leaders made Persian nationalism so sacred that nobody could oppose it. Any risk for Iran and Perso-Iranism was interpreted as a risk for Islam. Accordingly, for them any enmity with their Iranism was enmity with Islam which had to be suppressed by *jihad* (Holy war). So, they called for Islamic unity among the Muslim brothers to fight against the enemies of Islam, namely the enemies of Perso-Iranism, which at first comprised those who didn’t accept the domination of Persian ethnicity. The religious justification of suppression paved the way for these leaders “to deal with Kurdish forces severely and suppress them by God’s command” in Sabbaghian’s words.⁵⁷

During the five-day civil war in Sine/Sanandaj (18–22 March 1979), in a message on 19 March addressing the Muslim people of Kurdistan, Khomeini called any action against the government forces an action against Islam and the security of Muslims.⁵⁸ Afterwards, based on a Quranic verse, *Surah al-Fath 48:29*, in a speech on 17 August 1979, he pronounced: “These plotters in Kurdistan and other places are in the same league as the disbelievers; they should be dealt with severely.”⁵⁹ Subsequently, in his already mentioned decrees on 18–19 August, he commanded the armed forces to attack Kurdistan. They were declarations of *jihad* against Kurdish forces which led to a three-month war (18 August – 17 November 1979). In a message on 20 August, he denounced the Kurdish forces as “groups that are hostile to Islam” and declared the illegitimacy and illegality of the KDPI describing it as ‘a party of Satan’ and its leaders as ‘opponents of Islam’, saying that the Muslim brothers should not listen to their propaganda and had to support the Islamic forces in capturing them.⁶⁰ In another message on 22 August, he denounced the heads of the Kurdish parties as “the traitors to Islam and to the nation.”⁶¹ And, in a radio-TV message on 24 August 1979, he declared “they are not Muslims.”⁶² In a similar manner, Mehdi Bazargan, who claimed to believe in democracy, in some outpourings called the Kurdish forces “the enemy of the revolution and Kurdish Muslim people,”⁶³

57 Kayhan newspaper, 31 August 1979.

58 Al-Khomeini, *supra* note 19, V. 6, p. 339.

59 *Ibid.*, V. 9, p. 257.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 283.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 288.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 304.

63 Jomhuri-e Islami newspaper, 28 August 1979.

“anti-Islam and anti-revolution” and justified the Iranian army’s fighting under “Jihad for Iran and Islam.”⁶⁴

During the war in Kurdistan, the regime tried to separate Kurdish Ulama and motivate them, under Islam, against Kurdish forces. On 24 August 1979, Khomeini asked the Ulama to support Islam: “O Ulama of Kurdistan! Awaken your youth. O Ulama of Kurdistan! Support Islam. O Ulama of Kurdistan! Drive away these traitors and order their arrest and turn them over to the Islamic court. Do not let them escape the borders.”⁶⁵ On 30 August 1979, he said: “O venerable Ulama of Kurdistan! Come to the rescue of the people of Kurdistan!”⁶⁶ In a communication on 3 September 1979, he also said: “If we order general mobilisation, we do it for supporting the Kurdistan brethren and to help them get rid of the insurgents. God willing, we will soon expel them and their wickedness, and will severely punish those treacherous leaders for their evil acts.”⁶⁷

As Ward mentions, religious beliefs are one of the influences that have contributed to the shape and solidarity of the armed forces from the Achaemenid period to now,⁶⁸ their beliefs being used by Perso-Iranian nationalists particularly after the 1979 revolution. A few months after the ceasefire, when the conflict restarted in March-April 1980, Banisadr attributed the regime’s slain people to Islamic symbols to incite the masses and justify his order to the Iranian army to invade Kurdistan. In a speech on 1 April 1980, he said: “they [Kurdish forces] have killed three clerics, the prophet’s sons. [...] From this moment on the army have no right to take off their boots unless they cleanse that territory [Kurdistan] from the insurgents.”⁶⁹ Asking the Friday and congregational Imams in all cities to respect the regime’s martyrs, Banisadr equated the regime’s slain militia with the “martyrs of Islam and Iran.”⁷⁰ By similarising Iranian forces to Islam’s forces, he likened Kurdish forces to heresy’s forces, as well as comparing the confrontation between Iranian and Kurdish forces with the confrontation between Islam and heresy: “Islam faced and faces heresy (Kofr) in Kurdistan.”⁷¹ In a speech, published in Kayhan on 12 June 1980,

64 Kayhan newspaper 4 November 1979.

65 Al-Khomeini, *supra* note 19, V. 9, p. 310.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 339.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 356.

68 S. R. Ward, *Immortal; A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C, 2009) p. 312.

69 Enghlab-e Islami (n. 222) and Kayhan newspapers, 3 April 1980. Watch the speech, 16 September 2012, on: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqoEB4RcRFY>> visited on 29 April 2021.

70 Ettela’at newspaper, 15 May 1980.

71 Ettela’at and Kayhan newspapers, 17 May 1980.

he hoped the *jihad* of the regime's militia would be like the spiritual army of Prophet Mohammad.

Moreover, using religion the regime tried to defame Kurdish forces, especially the KDPI, in the public arena. For example, the ninth point of a secret 11-point plan of the joint staff of the Islamic Republic's army in 1981 ordered the armies "to discredit KDPI in public opinion and to weaken its leadership."⁷² The defamation was usually proclaimed in religious places and by clergy, mostly to show the KDPI as anti-Islam. Thus, since Perso-Shiite Iranism was the heart of their Islamism, the Persian leaders made the Kurdish forces as other to Islam, and pronounced them as the enemies of Islam in order to make suppression of them easier.

5.1.3 Attributing Kurdish Forces to Anti-Islam External Enemies

After the revolution, while the Islamic regime voiced the slogan "neither East nor West", the USA being named as the big Satan/Devil by Ayatollah Khomeini, the regime was practically dependent on Eastern powers. However, it labelled opposition groups as the hands of anti-Islam external enemies inside the country in order to suppress them. It especially used the conflict between Muslims and Zionists to encourage people to turn against the opposition as being pro-Zionism. In this regard, by attributing the Kurdish forces to big Satan, Zionism and communism, the regime separated the Kurdish Islamists from the mainstream Kurdish movement and paved the way to attack Kurdistan. While along with emphasizing their majority as Muslim, the Kurds announced that as Kurdish they just demanded their human rights.

During the abovementioned civil war in Sine, in a speech on 19 March 1979, Khomeini named any attack against the government's army as the action of non-Muslims and foreigners which must be forcefully removed.⁷³ Accordingly, the Kurdish forces were gradually attributed as being anti-Islam forces. On 13 June 1979 Khomeini announced: "There are disturbances in Kurdistan caused by the foreigners and the parties affiliated to them."⁷⁴ In his message on 20 August 1979, he denounced the Kurdish forces as "agents of foreigners" whose activities are "against the Islamic movement." According to him the KDPI "was directly affiliated with America and Zionism."⁷⁵ Subsequently, Sadeq Tabatabaei (1943–2015), the deputy prime minister in the interim government from FMI, attributed Kurdish forces to Israel and in a TV interview said: "Israel

72 K. Hussami, *Of My Memories 1979–1983* (Stockholm, 1993) (in Kurdish), v. 7, p. 193.

73 Al-Khomeini, *supra* note 19, V. 6, p. 339.

74 *Ibid.*, V. 8, p. 131.

75 *Ibid.*, V. 9, p. 283.

and international Zionism want to construct a second Israel in the region, in the common area of Kurds in Iranian, Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan.”⁷⁶ Moreover, Dariush Forouhar in an interview denounced them as “aliens and Zionists” to whom Mossad sent weapons.⁷⁷ Thus, the Persian leaders tied the Kurdish forces to anti-Islam external enemies to suppress them. As Forouhar mentioned in another interview, the regime’s “intention of the Crusades,”⁷⁸ was to invade Kurdistan with the objective of *jihad*. The regime used the concept of the *Fath-e* (conquest of) Kurdistan, which has a strong religious connotation of holy war against non-Muslims,⁷⁹ while the Kurds were Muslim.

5.2 *Resistance Appealing to Islamic Discourse*

During the 1979 revolution, the Kurds and other ethno-nations rose up against the Shah’s regime in Iran. After the revolution, there was some freedom for 5–6 months during the period of the interim government. The non-Persian leaders and organisations demanded a constituent assembly composed of the representatives of people elected in free elections to enact a democratic constitution that approved their rights, especially through autonomous regions. Kurdistan was under the control of Kurdish forces. They, particularly the KDPI, promoted the slogan ‘democracy for Iran and autonomy for Kurdistan’. Having a relation with the central government at the beginning, they announced their readiness to cooperate with it to make a democratic Iran within which the rights of all people would be regarded. Conversely, Perso-Shiite leaders, who themselves had no ethno-national problem, under the cover of religious identity followed a non-democratic way against non-Persians. At first, under the revolutionary climate and Islamic discourse, before creating a constituent assembly and enacting the constitution, and without presenting necessary information about the content of the new regime, they very quickly held a referendum on 30–31 March 1979 with only one option, and named the regime the Islamic Republic of Iran. Then, an election was held to form the Assembly of Experts instead of the constituent assembly. As already mentioned, under religious pretexts some of the non-Persian representatives elected from their constituency were not allowed to attend the assembly; also others withdrew during its sessions because their opinions were not regarded by the Persian representatives and regime’s leaders. Thus, without a real social contract and consensus,

76 Enghlab-e Islami (n. 62) and Kayhan newspapers, 3 September 1979.

77 Ettela’at newspaper, 4 September 1979.

78 *Ibid.*, 5 October 1979.

79 See K. Soleimani, and A. Mohammadpour ‘The securitization of life: Eastern Kurdistan under the rule of a Perso-Shi’i state’, 41:4 *Third World Quarterly* (2020) pp.663–682, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1695199.

the constitution was enacted, while the rights of non-Persian people, non-Shiite and some other minorities were not considered.⁸⁰ Moreover, they stopped the legal activities of the Kurdish parties as anti-Islam and anti-revolution parties and their elected representatives were prevented from attending the first Parliament. As was mentioned previously, the Persian leaders used the Islamic discourse to marginalise others and dominate the political space. It was under such conditions that the Kurdish forces inevitably appealed to the same discourse to resist the regime in order to gain their ethno-national rights and to thwart the plans of the Persian leaders. They emphasized that the majority of Kurds are Muslim and based on Islamic teachings the equality between Persian and non-Persian people should be considered.

5.2.1 Demanding Muslim Equality

In contrast to the Perso-Iranian politicians who emphasized Islam and Muslim brotherhood to quash ethno-national cleavages, to assimilate ethno-nations, and to justify their actions against Kurds, the Kurdish leaders demanded their ethno-national rights based on the equality of Muslim brothers.

At the beginning, under the effect of the hegemony of Islamic discourse in Iran, the majority of Kurdish leaders were not against an Islamic republic provided that it would be democratic and the Kurds would hold their own rights therein. Indeed, Kurdish leaders had a secular and democratic definition of the Islamic regime. For Sheikh Ezzedin, the Kurds could gain their demands in the Islamic state of Iran: "The unity of the nations of Iran and the real and perfect freedom in a 100 per cent Islamic democracy, is only possible when all nations of Iran including the Kurds have their own self-determination rights [...]. In this government [autonomous government of Kurdistan] state is separated from religion [...]."⁸¹ He named such a state "a real Islamic government" within which, according to the Quran, people have freedom of opinion and all ethno-nations and religious minorities like Zoroastrian and Baha'i minorities and even non-religious people have their own rights.⁸² In a message to Khomeini, Ezzedin mentioned that "the Kurdish nation expects that the Islamic revolution gives a positive response to all its historical aims and ambitions and removes all religious and national discriminations and oppressions forever."⁸³ In another message to the people of Meriwan and Kamyaran he

80 See S. Mofidi, 'Social Contract and Democratic Validity of Constitution (With a Focus on Iran and Iraq)', 6:3 *International Journal of Human Rights and Constitutional Studies* (2019) pp. 239–248, DOI: 10.1504/IJHRCS.2019.097974.

81 Kayhan newspaper, 4 March 1979.

82 Tehran Mosavvar weekly, 13 April 1979, n. 12, pp. 30–31 & 37.

83 Ayandegan newspaper, 26 June 1979.

called for the rights of all oppressed nations of Iran as the result of the Islamic revolution.⁸⁴ In an interview, he emphasized that the Quran approves the Kurdish “autonomy within a liberated Iran.”⁸⁵

Even when Islamic ideology became hegemonic, the secular leaders inevitably attempted to have consistency with Islamic discourse to gain Kurdish rights. Seeing the domination of Islamists in the post-revolution space, Qasimlou, who was personally secular and Marxist, tried to adapt his politics to the situation. In an interview he said: “under an Islamic Republic, the demands of Kurdish people can be easily resolved.”⁸⁶ For him there was “no contradiction between the issue of autonomy and the Islamic Republic’s regime.”⁸⁷ In a speech on 6 June 1980, Hussami, another secular-Marxist leader of the KDPI, also emphasized “the possibility that the Kurdish nation would reach the right of autonomy within the framework of the Islamic Republic.”⁸⁸

Nevertheless, the Kurdish leaders very soon understood the Persian leaders’ intentions against ethno-nations under the name of Islam. They boycotted the referendum for the Islamic Republic, since its content was not clear. In Sheikh Ezzeddin’s opinion the reality was that the new regime of Iran was “a dictatorship under the name of Islam” which was “not an Islamic regime.”⁸⁹ As he had said, for him a religion that “makes people against each other is not divine religion.”⁹⁰ In responding to the regime’s use of Islam and Muslim unity against the Kurds, he emphasized that: “Islam does not require that all Muslims should be governed by a single group of people. It recognizes that people are divided into different groups, nations and tribes. There is no reason within Islam why these groups should not order their own affairs.”⁹¹

Moreover, in an interview, Hossein Khalighi, an independent personality, then member of the KDPI and one of its leaders from 1980, mentioned the Quran verses and opposed reestablishing another Shiite-Safavid government, saying the rights of ethno-nations were given by Quran and had been in Islam throughout its history and if the regime’s leaders did not consider some of the Quran’s rules related to the rights of ethno-nations, their faith could not be “an Islamic faith and the basis of an Islamic republic government.”⁹² Thus, the

84 *Ibid.*, 30 July 1979.

85 Kayhan newspaper, 25 November 1979.

86 Etlâ’at newspaper, 21 February 1979.

87 *Ibid.*, 10 March 1980.

88 Hussami, *supra* note 71, p. 58.

89 D. Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement; Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 235.

90 Paygham-e Emrooz newspaper, 19 May 1979.

91 Romano, *supra* note 88, p. 235.

92 Tehran Musavvar, n. 16, 11 May 1979, pp. 32–34.

Kurdish leaders appealed to the Islamic discourse to preserve ethno-national diversity, as well as to gain Kurdish rights. Nevertheless, the Persian politicians continued to play the politics of marginalisation, while their plan to separate the Islamist groups as Muslim from the Kurdish forces as non-Muslim and anti-Islam, to justify their attack on them, was also successful.

5.2.2 Rejection of 'Opposition to Islam'

When the Persian leaders used Islamic discourse against the Kurdish forces and their demands declaring them as anti-Islam and non-Muslim, the Kurdish leaders, emphasizing the Muslimness of the majority of Kurds, announced that the forces emanated from Kurdish society and they didn't have a problem with Islam. Apart from some already mentioned religious groups who had ethno-national demands as well, some nationalist leaders were religious people, and the majority of the members of secular Kurdish parties were Muslim. For them, the problem was political and related to human rights. Thus, they reacted to the Persian politicians' political manoeuvring of marginalisation of the Kurds' demands through dividing them into Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, Qasimlou emphasized the Kurds as an Islamic nation who want to live under the Islamic Republic as brothers together with other nations.⁹³ According to him, the majority of the KDPI's members were Muslim, although it was a secular party.⁹⁴ In an interview also he said:

*The Kurdish nation has risen against neither Islam nor the Islamic Republic but has defended its rights, and they [regime's leaders] should defend the Kurdish right based on their Islamic, humane and national duty. [...] we not only have no anti-Islamic belief but also most of our party's members are Muslim, they have a deep belief in Islam's tenets. Overall, we are Muslim.*⁹⁵

Addressing the Persian leaders with such statements, the Kurdish leaders declared that if they were brothers both parties should have equal rights. Otherwise, brotherhood had no meaning. After some negotiation about autonomy between governmental officials and Kurdish leaders, in the end Allameh Nouri, the absolute representative of Banisadr, the president of Iran, proposed adding the word "Islamic" to "autonomy" to become 'Islamic Khodmokhtari/

93 Kayhan newspaper, 21 November 1979.

94 A. R. Qasimlou, *Tavgey Heqîqet (part of the works of Dr. Qasimlou)*, compiled by Kawa Bahrami (Silêmanî: KDPI' publications, 2006) (in Kurdish), v. 2, p. 30.

95 Kayhan newspaper, 27 November 1979.

autonomy'. Aware of the problem that under Muslim unity the Shiite regime did not accept the concept of nationality for non-Persian ethno-nations, Qasimlou "willingly accepted", in his words.⁹⁶ In a speech in 1979, he announced that "if the Islamic autonomy would be vested, the Kurdish nation would accept and would be happy."⁹⁷ However, the Kurdish leaders happily accepted an Islamic regional government within the Islamic regime. Nevertheless, the regime rejected Islamic autonomy too, although it could be an example of Muslim equality. Indeed, it was all a game of the regime to strengthen itself. After the three-month war between the two parties its suggestion was, in order to buy time, to hold the referendum of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic and then hold the first elections of the presidency and parliament, as well as "to stabilise its power and to reorganize its forces" in Qasimlou's words.⁹⁸

Hence, to gain their rights within the religious regime, the Kurdish leaders tried to have consistency with the hegemonic discourse. Nevertheless, the regime officially and legally did not accept any kind of autonomy for the Kurds. This led to restarting the war – for a long time.

5.2.3 Declaring the Shiite Regime as Anti-Islam

Throughout history, the Sunni and Shiite (as a minority in the Muslim world but majority in Iran) sects have accused each other of having some non-Islamic and non-monotheistic beliefs. After the revolution, while the regime apparently magnified the general Islamic identity against non-Persian identities, it practically reinforced Shiism as the true belief. The Perso-Shiite leaders not only preserved Shiism as the state religion in the Constitution (article 12) but also added article 5 of Velayat-e Faqih (guardianship of the Islamic jurist). It led to an important dispute between the two sects. The Sunni leaders, including the leaders and representatives of Sunni Kurds, were very much against it. They denounced it as a measure against Islam and Islamic unity. It especially affected the stance of some Kurdish Islamists such as Moftizada, as already mentioned, who at the beginning cooperated with the Islamic regime. He objected to the article.⁹⁹ Along with Islamic sentiments, the regime used Shiite sentiments especially among Shiite Kurds against Kurdish forces who

96 F. Halliday, "The Clergy Have Confiscated the Revolution," an interview with *Abdulahman Qassemli*, *Middle East Report*, no. 98, July/August 1981, <<https://merip.org/1981/07/the-clergy-have-confiscated-the-revolution/>> visited on 27 July 2021.

97 Qasimlou, *supra* note 31, p. 359.

98 A. R. Qasimlou, *The Report of the Central Committee to Fifth Congress of KDPI* (KDPI' publications, 1981) p. 16.

99 Ayandegan newspaper, 20 June 1979.

were mostly Sunni. Unlike, Sunni people who usually did not accept Shiism as Muslim, they had sympathy with the Kurdish organisations.

When the regime invaded Kurdistan under the name of Islam, in reaction the Kurdish leaders resorted to the above religious dispute, along with Kurdish nationalist sentiments, to encourage people to defend and fight against the Shiite regime. In this regard, Qasimlou saw the imposition of the Velayat-e Faqih principle as the reason for the disagreements between Islamic faiths which made the Sunni people second class citizens.¹⁰⁰ In a statement in September 1982, published in Kurdistan newspaper n. 86, he announced: "Khomeini's Regime lies if it pretends it fights KDPI, Khomeini's war is against all the people of Kurdistan. Khomeini hates Kurdistan, because its people are Muslim and don't accept Khomeini's Velayat-e Faqih which vitalises the tyranny and despotism of medieval centuries."¹⁰¹ Against the regime, the KDPI resorted to Sunni clergies and their influence in society to warn people against the Shiite regime as a non-Islamic regime. Qasimlou said:

The clergymen should make people aware that Khomeini under the name of Islam does work that no Infidel/kafir has done. It is necessary to clarify the crimes of Khomeini's regime for all people. The clergymen have to refuse the principle of Velayat-e Faqih as a superstitious and anti-Islam view and motivate the masses to defend the freedom of their homeland.¹⁰²

Thus, the reinforcement of Shiism by the regime and subsequently the growth of a sectarian dispute decreased the importance of Islamic discourse in solving ethno-national problems. The dispute affected the resistance of Kurdish forces. They resorted to it against the Persian politicians' abuse of Islamic discourse which had also amplified distrust of the Islamic regime. For instance, a few years later (in 1984) during the war between the KDPI and the regime, the regime secretly suggested negotiation, based on the Quran as judge. But the KDPI saw that as deception and using the Quran as a tool as the regime had done previously. Conversely, the KDPI suggested an official and open negotiation since the problem was not religious but political. Mentioning the respectability of Islam, the KDPI announced it was a problem that the regime did not accept Kurdish rights and demands.¹⁰³ Finally, the regime continued to suppress the Kurdish forces by the use of violent military power, which they resisted.

100 Qasimlou, *supra* note 97, p. 15.

101 Qasimlou, *supra* note 93, p. 176.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

103 *Ibid.*, 31 & 41.

6 Discussion: Uniting, Mobilizing and Legitimizing Functions

Based on the degree of influence of religion in societies and on socio-political conditions, the political function of religion has different aspects at various levels. The religious community is the biggest ‘imagined community’, in Anderson’s words.¹⁰⁴ Accordingly, religiosity based on public religion not only has a local-regional function but also national and international functions in politics; especially, its ideological function in the political sphere “to create a system of instrumental means and secular objectives.”¹⁰⁵ As Friedland mentions, the political elites politicize religious differences and make collective violence a means in their political struggles.¹⁰⁶ Religion has the capability to legitimize or illegitimize power relations; as in political theology, it is done by appealing to God. It is used both to maintain power relations and to change them especially by making the struggles divine and waging holy wars.¹⁰⁷ In this relation, without utilizing the function of religion it was difficult for Perisan leaders to dominate all ethno-nations, especially to suppress the Kurdish movement after the 1979 revolution.

The existence of a common religion (Islam) among the majority of people, a religious hegemonic discourse, a religious supreme leader of the revolution, and his authority to issue Fatwas paved the way for using religion by the Persian and Persianized leaders. Using the Islamic discourse and ideology in multi-national Iran, they not only ‘bound the ethno-nations together’¹⁰⁸ but also made Perso-Iranian nationalism sacred so that enmity towards it was enmity to Islam. They continued the Pahlavi regime’s politics and hid their ethno-national aims under ‘Islamic Unity’, as a connotation by which they meant a national unity to make a one-nation country based on Persian ethnicity instead of a multi-national country. Propagating Muslim brotherhood and unity, the regime used Islamic identity as an umbrella and reinforced it as the broadest identity to cover, unite and mobilise more people from various dominated ethno-nations, as well as to marginalise non-Persian ethno-national identities to lessen social cleavages, integrating and assimilating them, while following Shiite-Persian interests. Simultaneously, the Persian politicians used

104 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, London, 2006) p. 12.

105 Apter, *supra* note 10, p. 89.

106 Friedland, *supra* note 1.

107 See M. B. T. Borg and J. W. V. Henten, *Powers; Religion as a Social and Spiritual Force* (Fordham university press, New York, 2010) pp. 7–12.

108 Akbarzadeh et al., *supra* note 28.

Islam to justify and legitimate the assimilation, aggression and violence. They made the ethno-national conflict a religious conflict at a higher level, namely between Muslim and non-Muslim, not Shiite and Sunni.

Thus, the revolution's Persian leaders succeeded in attracting and mobilizing not only groups of Shiite Kurds but also Sunni Kurds. They easily took in some religious groups of Kurds such as Maktab Quran and the Muslim Brotherhood by propounding the idea of Islamic brotherhood and unity. Although these groups soon discovered that the regime distrusted Sunnis and was very Shiite, which broke the common religion tie, but the Persian leaders' strategy had struck an important cleavage among Kurdish forces. It separated the Islamists from nationalists and almost deactivated them. The reinforcement of the Islamist climate and Islamic identity against Kurdish identity in Kurdistan favoured the dominant ethno-nation in Iran.

Although the Kurdish nationalists argued that their demands were related to human and self-determination rights, not their religious belief, under the effect of the hegemony of Islamic discourse after the revolution and against the Persian nationalists' politics, they also resorted to religion and Islamic discourse to defend ethno-national diversity and their rights. While Islam was an important part of traditional Kurdish society, having been accused of being anti-Islam by Persian leaders, the Kurdish forces attempted to outline their demands through religious arguments based on Muslimness and Islamic teachings, too. They argued that along with recommending Muslim brotherhood and unity, Islam considers the differences and does not allow assimilation. For them, 'unity' did not mean a group's domination, and 'brotherhood' equated with having equal individual and group rights. They expected Persian leaders, based on their Islamic duty, would consider the equal socio-political rights of their Muslim brothers to have their own rights like Persian people. Nevertheless, it did not happen. When the regime invaded, the Kurdish forces strongly resisted and encouraged people to defend their homeland based not only on their patriotic but also their religious duty. Moreover, they resorted to a sectarian dispute between Sunni and Shiite. Thus, they tried to utilise religion to legitimize their rights, their defence and their fight against the regime.

Indeed, from the beginning the politics of Persian leaders, even their religious leaders who were expected to truly believe what they said, gradually strengthened suspicion that they were abusing common religion against Sunnis and non-Persians. While they were aware of the Islamic teachings about equality between groups and considering the rights of different ethnations, they blatantly ignored those parts of religion were not in their favour.

Assuming they were not aware, the Islamist and nationalist Kurdish leaders made them aware of the issue. Among Islamists, Ahmad Moftizada using religious arguments very clearly advised the Perso-Shiite leaders to consider Sunni and Kurdish rights. Among religio-national personalities, Khalighi in an interview at the time very openly emphasized this issue: "I am wondering why they are scared of accepting this right. Here the question is whether they are not aware of Quran – which I believe they are aware of- or they don't want to consider some of the Quran's rules that are not in favour of their government and ruling."¹⁰⁹ Accordingly, Kurdish leaders believed that "all crimes against the Kurdish nation are executed under the name and cover of Islam," as voiced by Hussami on 16 August 1980.¹¹⁰

Therefore, the Kurdish forces were neither deceived by Islamic discourse into withdrawing from their ethno-national rights, since they were Muslim, nor were the regime's politics affected by their religious reactions and arguments. Consequently, the Persian leaders imposed a civil war on Kurdistan under the guise of fighting anti-Islam forces. After centralizing and consolidating their power, they resorted to religious decree in using military force to invade Kurdistan and to mobilise people all around Iran against Kurdish forces to suppress them by force. Their politics of using religion to divide the Kurds had already dissipated the Kurdish nationalist forces. It made the Kurdish front weak and their suppression easier, while apart from controlling public facilities and creating economic pressures, the regime used public press and communication systems to propagate against the Kurdish forces as anti-Islam, devils, Zionist and communists. Although after a long war the Kurdish organisations were finally forced to leave the borders of Iran, and Rojhelat was totally occupied by the military of regime, the conflict continued.

7 Conclusion

As in other Middle Eastern societies, Iranian societies are often traditional which makes religion an important part of the socio-cultural structure. Yet, its political function is also important. In the Perso-Iranian and Kurdish nationalist confrontations during the early years after the 1979 revolution, religion prominently held the uniting, mobilizing and legitimating functions for the Persian government, while it only had a partly legitimating one for the Kurdish opposition organisations. The religious and secular Persian

109 Tehran Musavvar weekly, n. 16, 11 May 1979, pp. 32–34.

110 Hussami, *supra* note 71, p. 91.

politicians used the social influence of religion and Islamic discourse including Muslim brotherhood and Islamic unity to promote Islamic identity to marginalise the non-Persian ethno-national identities in Iran. They reduced all other social conflicts to a non-Muslim/Muslim conflict and mobilised masses to fight the enemies of Islam including external enemies and their internal affiliates, especially the Kurdish nationalists. Moreover, they used Islam to legitimate and justify their measures. By unifying Perso-Iranism and Islamism, any opposition to Perso-Iranian nationalism became opposition to Islam which had to be harshly suppressed. Consequently, by issuing religious decrees and motivating the religious sentiments of the masses, the military and other armed organisations invaded Kurdistan to suppress the Kurdish forces. In reaction, appealing to the same discourse and emphasizing their Muslimness and the equal rights of Muslim societies, the Kurdish nationalist forces demanded their ethno-national rights. The fruitlessness of negotiations with the government to gain autonomy led them to defend their homeland, as recommended by Islamic teachings, and resist the regime's invasion. Apart from the non-Muslim/Muslim conflict, the Shiite-Sunni dispute also impacted on the nationalist conflict. Against the use of Shiite sentiments by the Persian leaders, the Kurdish leaders resorted to Sunni sentiments in their defence. However, because of the domination of the Persian leaders in the governmental system and control of all public facilities, the voices of Kurdish groups were not heard, and under the name of Islam they were severely suppressed. Nevertheless, the nationalistic conflict between the Persian state and Kurdish organisations has so far continued.

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