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## Religion in Kurdistan

MICHEL LEEZENBERG

### Introduction

Among secular Kurdish nationalists, and in foreign media, one may find a persistent (self) image that the Islamic faith is less widespread and less deeply rooted among the Kurds than among their Arab, Turkish and Persian neighbours. To some extent, this image is confirmed by widely reported events like the secular Kurdish resistance against Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979; the opposition of the pro-Kurdish, secularist and pluralist HDP against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian Islamism during the 2010s; and female guerrillas (not to mention a 'queer brigade') of the Syrian Kurdish YPG against the bearded warriors of the so-called Islamic State during the 2014 siege of Kobanî and after.

On closer inspection, things appear to be rather more complicated: religion has always played, and continues to play, a rather greater role in Kurdish public and private life than admitted by secular nationalists. In fact, one might even argue that religious factors have to a large extent made the Kurds into what they are today; but to such sweeping claims, one should immediately add the caveat that the factor or category of religion has itself undergone qualitative changes over the centuries as well. This chapter presents a brief overview of the most important of these developments. My focus is not primarily on what has been called 'political Islam', or on the political use of religion as an instrument or vocabulary of mobilization, as in the uprisings headed by religious leaders like Sheikh Ubeydullah and Sheikh Said (cf. Chapters 3 and 20); rather, I will trace the changing character of religion as a societal force, its interaction with developing Kurdish national identity and the changing relations between groups of different denominations in the region; finally, I will discuss the question of how and why newly politicized forms of religion emerged in the first place.

Before engaging in this discussion, however, a number of methodological caveats are called for. When discussing the historical development of religion, not only in Kurdistan but also more generally, one should beware of reproducing a number of widely held but debatable assumptions. The first of these is what one may call 'methodological nationalism': next to openly nationalist or politically partisan perspectives, there is also a more tacit and seemingly less problematic presumption of the nation, the nation-state or the state's hegemonic culture, as a self-evident framework of analysis. Apart from its problematic normative implications, this assumption tends to hide from view wider and interconnected world-historical processes (of which the worldwide rise of the nation-state form is, in fact, a prime example).

A second assumption is the still widespread secularist or modernist belief that religion is a thing from the past, which will – and should – wither away in ongoing and irreversible processes of modernization and democratization; that is, the belief that secularization is both a descriptive factuality and a normative desideratum. Given such secularist assumptions, which appear in both liberal and Marxist guises, any reassertion of religion in the modern world is almost by definition atavistic or reactionary. The belief in a linear process of secularization, however, is no longer tenable even in Europe, where it was first formulated. Moreover, in many respects, the post-1989 rise of political Islam (and of other forms of politicized religion elsewhere in the world) was not a return to the past, but a qualitatively novel phenomenon. One should, therefore, explore exactly *what* is novel in these developments.

Finally, one should avoid the pitfall of what may be called a 'minorities paradigm'. Not only have the Kurds often been depicted as a minority within existing nation-states; research on religion in Kurdistan also displays a marked bias towards religious minorities, like Christians of different denominations, Jews, and heterodox groups like the Yezidis, the Alevis and the Kaka'is. Rather fewer, both proportionally and absolutely, are studies of the varieties of more orthodox Sunni Islam, with the partial exception of the Sufi orders active in the region. It has become fashionable to dismiss such biases as 'Orientalist'; but in the absence of any positive alternative account, such criticisms do little more than label the problem. A minorities paradigm leads both to empirical distortions and to conceptual and normative problems: On the one hand, it wrongly implies that there is nothing specifically Kurdish about the Sunni denomination of the vast majority of Kurds;

below, I will argue that there are in fact specifically Kurdish forms and formations of Islam. On the other, a concept of ‘minority’ defined in primarily numerical terms risks masking the relations of power involved in the ‘minorization’ of particular groups. Calling a group a ‘minority’ carries the risk of reproducing and tacitly legitimating the hegemonic discourse of locally dominant actors, and of legitimizing practices of assimilation and/or exclusion. The same point, incidentally, can be made about the distinction between ‘orthodox’ and ‘heterodox’ forms of religion.<sup>1</sup>

In order to counter such assumptions, the present chapter will, first, employ a perspective of ‘global history’ (cf. Bayly, 2004), or what Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997) has called ‘connected history’; that is, an approach to writing history that neither simply enlarges one’s scale nor merges pre-given national histories, but systematically questions the very parcelling of history into national entities.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach need not result in a sceptical denial or dissolution of individual national (or, for that matter, religious) identities; but it traces their development as part of wider and interconnected world-historical processes.

Second, my approach will also be genealogical, in that it systematically looks for ruptures and qualitative changes affecting such seemingly neutral and unchanging analytical categories as ‘religion’, ‘orthodox’ and ‘heterodox’, and for the forms of power involved in these changes.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, I will not assume any linear process of ‘progress’ or ‘modernization’, which tends to be represented as the progressive branching off of distinct and autonomous fields or spheres of social action, like religion and politics; rather, I will trace how the sphere of religion was reorganized, redefined and renegotiated over the centuries, in particular in relation to the – equally contested – development of state power.

- 1 To mention but one example: both KRG and PKK discourses pay lip service to societal and religious pluralism; but they do so in very different terms, and in part in clear opposition to each other. Moreover, in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, a discourse of pluralism masks what appears to be an increasingly restrictive conception of Kurdishness, developing from the early notion of *kurdîyêti* to a more inclusive concept of *kurdîstani* during the 1980s, only to be further restricted after 2003 to *kurdî* as an idea, ideal or identity, which is not only self-consciously anti-Arab and non-Islamic, but also less accommodating towards minority groups seen as less than fully and unambiguously Kurdish.
- 2 Despite this emphasis on global or connected historiography, the present chapter will have relatively little to say about the religious effect of migration to Europe and elsewhere, and about the religious dimensions of Kurdish diaspora life, for the simple reason that relatively little research into these matters has been conducted.
- 3 Cf. Leezenberg (2019) for a more detailed theoretical discussion of the modalities of power involved in the orthodox–heterodox distinction.

## The Premodern and Early Modern Ottoman Empire

Kurdistan has long been known to have harboured several centres of Sunni religious learning of the Shafi'ite *madhhab* or school of law; at the same time, the region was known for its heterodox sects. Kurds lived in the ill-defined and contested borderlands between the Ottoman and Safavid (later Qajar) empires. In the northernmost regions of these marches, the majority of the population may have been Christian; a substantial number of these Armenians had undergone a language shift to Kurdish. Among rural Muslim Kurds, Sufi orders or *tariqas* were widespread, the most important among these being the Qadirî and the Naqshbandî orders. But already in the sixteenth century, one finds references to substantial numbers of Kurds practising an 'exaggerated' (*ghuluww*) worship of Imam 'Ali or adhering to the Yezidi faith.<sup>4</sup> For long periods of time, however, the Ottoman authorities had little if any incentive to brand any of these population groups heretics or infidels, let alone to act on such judgements.

In various post-Ottoman circles, there is a long-standing tendency to view Ottoman policies through the prism of religious and ethnic repression. This tendency may be found not only among nationalist historians but also among smaller religious groups. Thus, Yezidi historians conventionally characterize their history as marked by seventy-three *ferman* ('catastrophes' or even 'genocides'); from this perspective, the genocidal 2014 IS offensive against the Yezidis in Sinjar area in Iraq was only the most recent event in a continuous history of persecutions. Alevi activists, too, tend to depict Ottoman rule as an uninterrupted and centuries-long sequence of oppression. Prior to the 1514 Battle of Çaldıran, however, and after the deaths of Yavuz Sultan Selim and Shah Isma'îl, religious concerns with heresy, heterodoxy or sectarian antagonisms between Sunnis and Shiites appear not to have been high on the governmental agenda. Instead, as will appear below, these concerns – and the concepts informing them – underwent a qualitative change in the course of the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, during the early modern period, a number of distinct ethnic or sectarian groups appear either to have developed more pronouncedly heterodox doctrines and practices or to have started defining themselves in more emphatically if not defiantly un-Islamic or anti-Islamic terms; or to come to have been perceived in more antagonistic terms by Ottoman

<sup>4</sup> Cf. van Bruinessen (2000: 42).

officials. There is evidence that both the Yezidis and the Ahl-e Haqq have become more 'heterodox' and less recognizably Islamic in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>5</sup>

The history of the Yezidis cannot be traced further back than the late eleventh century; attempts to link the faith to pre-Islamic Iranian sources have to extrapolate from oral traditions and to resort to the methods of comparative religion.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Yezidi faith emerged in a clearly Islamic environment. Its founder, Sheikh 'Adî bin Musâfir (d. 1162 CE), was a Sunni Sufi from Lebanon, who, after his studies in Baghdad, settled in the valley of Lalesh. Several of his writings have been preserved; all of them are of an orthodox Sunni character. His earliest followers were mostly Kurds of the local Hekarî tribe.

Among the earliest sources on, and critiques of, Yezidism is the *Risâla al-'adawiyya* by the famous fourteenth-century theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE).<sup>7</sup> Remarkably, Ibn Taymiyya nowhere accuses the Yezidis, or as he calls them, 'adawiyya, of unbelief; rather, he praises Sheikh 'Adî as a pious Muslim, but criticizes his followers (whom he characterizes as 'ignorant Kurds') for allowing their veneration for their founding saint to lapse into idolatry and polytheism. Thus, Ibn Taymiyya clearly sees the Yezidis' main sin as *ghuluww*, or 'exaggeration', rather than unbelief (*kufî*), dualism or materialism.<sup>8</sup> Whatever their factual correctness, Ibn Taymiyya's comments have embarrassed later scholars, Kurdish nationalists and Yezidi activists alike. They are also difficult to square, it should be added, with the genocidal persecution of Yezidis by IS, who often appealed to Ibn Taymiyya's writings in their violent reinterpretation of the Islamic faith, radically distorting the latter's words and intentions in the process.

The premodern and early modern history of the Alevis, too, is less uniformly marked by repression and persecution than is often thought.

5 Cf. Leezenberg (2019: 52–4); van Bruinessen (2000: 40–1).

6 For a comprehensive historical review, see Guest (1987); for a study employing the methods of comparative religion, see Kreyenbroek (1995).

7 Reprinted as Ibn Taymiyya (1906).

8 Lescot (1938: 37–43); Kreyenbroek (1995: 251) summarily rejects the potential value of Ibn Taymiyya as a historical source. In fact, the history of Yezidi studies reflects an entire politics of research: until today, many Kurds and Yezidis think that discussions of the Yezidis' mystical-Islamic background are dictated by an Arab-nationalist agenda; an emphasis on their pre-Islamic origins, first propagated in missionary circles, continues to inform Kurdish nationalists and Western European scholars alike; and in post-Soviet Armenia the political programme of strictly distinguishing between Yezidis and Kurds is reflected in scholarly efforts to credit the former with an entirely non-Kurdish history and language, Êzîdîti. Considerations of space preclude a fuller discussion of these matters.

The background of the changing Ottoman attitudes towards Alevi was, of course, the confrontation between the Ottoman and Safavid empires. The political rivalries between the two were articulated in partly sectarian terms, with Shah Isma‘il claiming to be a reincarnation of Imam ‘Ali. Initially, he thus appealed to *ghulât* sympathies among the rural population in Anatolia and on the Iranian plateau; soon after consolidating his rule, however, he started propagating Twelver (*ithna ‘ashari*) Shiism as defined by urban Shiite ulema, and turning this clergy into a kind of state religious hierarchy. To the extent that one can speak of religious ‘orthodoxy’ during this period, however, this was defined by the ruler’s imperial power as much as by urban, literate religious elites.

In the wake of the Battle of Çaldıran (1514 CE), in which Shah Isma‘il’s troops were decisively defeated, the Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Selim initiated persecutions of heterodox Shiites, or Qizilbash as they were called. This religious persecution appears not to have been a long-standing Ottoman policy, however: after the suppression of the Qizilbash revolts in the course of the sixteenth century, and prior to the early nineteenth-century Tanzimat reforms, the Ottoman authorities generally turned a blind eye to the Qizilbash and their possibly heterodox practices, and tended to treat them as belonging to the Bektashî *tariqa*, which was considered politically loyal.

Conversely, the Safavids appear to have engaged in persecutions of Sunnis and to have presented Sunni ulema with the alternative of conversion to Twelver Shiism, exile or execution. These forcible conversions, however, appear to have targeted local ulema rather than the population at large: the bulk of the rural population in Kurdistan, as in other remote regions like Baluchistan, appears to have remained Sunni. Khaled El-Rouayheb (2015: ch. 1) has argued that as a result, substantial numbers of Sunni Kurdish ulema fled the Safavid Empire and resettled in Ottoman lands, giving a strong impulse to the local development of the rational sciences (including logic and philosophy) in a process already noted by Kâtip Çelebi.<sup>9</sup> These Kurdish religious figures fleeing the Safavid Empire also appear to have included Sufis like the famous Sheikh Mahmûd, who hailed from Urmiya and was executed in Diyarbakir on the orders of Sultan Murad IV in 1639.<sup>10</sup>

The hereditary Kurdish rulers of the marches maintained a careful balancing act between their Ottoman and Safavid overlords; some of them repeatedly switched allegiance. These changing and unstable loyalties could

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in El-Rouayheb (2015: 57).

<sup>10</sup> On Sheikh Mahmûd, see Evilya Çelebi, *Seyâhatnâme* IV, fol. 208b–209b; cf. van Bruinessen (2000: 79–82, 90–9); van Bruinessen and Boeschoten (1988).

also be expressed in sectarian terms, with Kurdish *mirs* loyal to the Ottomans claiming a strictly Sunni faith (cf. van Bruinessen, 1992: 136–45). Thus, sectarian labels virtually came to define political loyalty: in *Hesht Bihisht*, Idrîs Bidlîsî simply appears to call Qizilbash anyone who resists the Ottoman army or refuses to fight against the Safavids.<sup>11</sup> It appears as difficult to reduce religious affiliations to political loyalties, however, as to explain political developments from religious factors alone.

Chronicles like Idrîs Bidlîsî's *Hesht Bihisht* and Sherefeddîn Bidlîsî's *Sherefnâme* focus on local courtly elites; for the social history of seventeenth-century Kurdistan, Evliya Çelebi's *Seyâhatnâme* is by far our most important source (Dankoff, 2011). Ehmedê Xani's writings provide another valuable perspective on seventeenth-century religious life among the Kurds. For different reasons, however, both sources should be treated with caution. Evliya's account abounds with anecdotes that are as obscene as they are fanciful, while Xani's writings are primarily didactic, prescriptive and/or fictional, rather than descriptive.

Evliya, despite a certain urban bias (witness his focus on cities like Diyarbakir) and despite a certain elite bias (whether towards Ottoman officials or towards Kurdish khans), includes much useful information on local popular beliefs and practices. He lists six Sufi lodges in Kurdistan, of which three are associated with the Naqshbandî order.<sup>12</sup> He also describes various religious practices among Kurds at, or near, the court of Bidlîs that can barely be considered Islamic, let alone orthodox; but he seems more interested in telling entertaining stories than in expressing shock at deviant forms of religion. Thus, he describes the antics of one Molla Muhammad, a local Sufi, and possibly a Qalandar. During a celebration at the Khan's palace, Evliya tells us, this molla danced around all naked, but revealed no genitals or buttocks; next, he started flying around in the air, revealing his penis and showering the spectators with urine (231a16–b13).<sup>13</sup>

Evliya's observations on the Yezidis are equally informative. Especially important is book 4 of the *Seyâhatname*, which contains a lengthy account of an Ottoman expedition against the Yezidis in Sinjar area; from this and other passages, the Yezidis appear not as a persecuted religious minority but as an armed tribal forced to be reckoned with. Evliya calls the Yezidis, or as he

11 Sönmez (2012: 81); on Idrîs-i Bidlîsî's intermediary position between the Ottomans and the Safavids, see also Genç (2019).

12 Cf. van Bruinessen (2000: 87–110, esp. 90).

13 For an English translation of Evliya's description of his sojourn in Bitlis, cf. Dankoff (1990).



labels them, ‘Yezidi Kurds’, as ‘godless’ (*bî-dîn*); but it is not clear whether he does so because of their religious beliefs, about which he says little, or because of their banditry.<sup>14</sup> More generally, Evliya calls groups like the Yezidis and the Qizilbash ‘without religion’ (*bî-dîn*) and ‘without denomination’ (*bî-mezheb*) (e.g. 4.53); but on the whole, he appears less concerned with religious orthodoxy than with political loyalty and social order and security. Hence, it is very well possible that his use of theological terms of religious heterodoxy figuratively stands for social rebelliousness and banditry.

Another significant phenomenon of the early modern era, which has yet to find a satisfactory explanation, is the rise of Kurdish vernacular learning, most famously but not exclusively to be found in Ehmedê Xanî’s writings. In this process, one may argue, not only did a specifically Kurdish form of Sunni Islamic religiosity emerge, but also a more unified form of the (northern) Kurdish language used in learning and writing. In the mid-seventeenth century, Evliya still wrote that in the madrasas in Kurdistan, Arabic and Persian were the main languages of instruction; a few decades later, however, a significant shift towards the written use of Kurdish in rural madrasas occurred.<sup>15</sup> First, Ehmedê Xanî composed several rhymed didactic works for the earliest stages of religious education: the *Nûbihara piçûkan*, a short Arabic–Kurdish vocabulary, and the *Eqîdeya Îmanê*, a brief and simple profession of the faith. Second, a number of prose works for the next stage of madrasa education were written in the course of the eighteenth century. The most significant of these is perhaps Eli Teremaxî’s *Tesrîfa Kurmancî*, a short work on *sarf*, or morphology; another is Molla Yûnus Khalqatîni’s *Terqîb û Zurûf*, dated 1200AH (1785CE). For several centuries, the madrasas in northern Kurdistan appear to have had a remarkably uniform and partly vernacularized curriculum, or *rêz*, which started with elementary Kurdish-language textbooks, and proceeded, first, to the basic and widely shared introductory texts on Arabic grammar and the Islamic faith, and subsequently to specifically Shafi’ite works.<sup>16</sup>

14 Evliya 4/65–8, 70; 3/267–78; 4/61–71; 5/6–9; cf. Guest (1987: 46–9).

15 During the seventeenth century, there was no such thing as an Ottoman madrasa curriculum. Apart from a small number of basic texts on Arabic grammar and on the Islamic faith, the central authorities did not make any attempt to impose either the Hanafi *madhhab* or a unified corpus of texts to be studied. On the other hand, regardless of sectarian differences, much of the basics of the madrasa curriculum was shared by Sunnis and Shiites alike in the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires (cf. Robinson, 1997).

16 On madrasa life in northern Kurdistan, see Zinar (1993); al-Bouti (1998); cf. Leezenberg (2014).

Like Xanî, Teremaxî is very conscious of doing something novel; in the introduction to his work, he states that ‘for the community of the Kurds, it is necessary to know of the science of *sarf* in the Kurdish language.’<sup>17</sup> It turns out that Kurdish-language authors like Xanî and Teremaxî reflect a much wider process of *vernacularization*, which appears to have occurred throughout the Ottoman Empire, and even beyond (cf. Leezenberg, 2016). In this process, Arabic and Persian were not so much replaced by vernacular languages; rather, their use became more strictly confined to specific learned and religious purposes. In this context, it should be noted that, despite the Ottoman–Safavid confrontations, Persian as a language of *adab* and mystical literature was hardly if at all associated with either ‘*ajamî* political dynasties or religious sectarianism.

In short, the early modern period not only saw gradual changes in attitudes towards, and possibly self-definition of, heterodox groups, but also the emergence of specifically Kurdish forms of orthodox Sunni Islamic learning. These processes, it should be noted, occurred largely if not entirely independently from Western European cultural, economic or other influences: they reflect a broader dynamic that can also be discerned elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire, and in other parts of the Islamic world.

### The Modernizing Ottoman Empire

The Tanzimat reforms of the nineteenth century have long been seen as a series of largely unsuccessful attempts at centralization of the Ottoman Empire, in a desperate attempt to ward off the steadily increasing influence of European imperialist powers, paired with the increasing, and increasingly visible, presence of Western (and in particular Protestant) missionaries on Ottoman territory. There were challenges to Ottoman authority from within the empire as well. On the one hand, there were the Greek and Serbian revolts in the empire’s European provinces, which culminated in the creation of a de facto independent hereditary monarchy in Serbia in 1817, and in the establishment of an independent Greek state in 1830. On the other hand, the Wahhâbî movement attacked and conquered Mecca and Medina in 1803, directly challenging the Ottoman rulers’ self-legitimation as protectors of the two holiest cities in Islam.

17 ‘Jo boy tayîfa Ekradan ra jî lazim e ku bi zimanê Kurmancî ew ji ‘ilmê serfê bizanin,’ in Newayî (2018: 59).

Seen on a larger scale, however, these radical challenges do not simply reflect the death throes of a long-declining empire. Most importantly for our purposes, the nineteenth century led to a reorganization and transformation, rather than a decline, of religion, not only in the Ottoman Empire but worldwide. In Europe, this century has – with some justification – been seen as an era of secularization, due in part to a relative drop in church attendance and to the emergence of new scientific theories that were implicitly or openly at odds with church dogma, like Darwinism and Marxism. Worldwide, however, this century also witnessed the expansion, consolidation and indeed redefinition of religion.<sup>18</sup> Thus, British historian Christopher Bayly characterizes the nineteenth century as marked by a convergence in both bodily and textual religious practices, which led to a reconceptualization of such practices in terms of different but commensurable ‘world religions’, like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism (Bayly, 2004: 332).

In the Ottoman Empire, and more specifically in Kurdistan, one may likewise observe rearticulations of religious doctrine, authority and agency. Both Western missionaries and Ottoman authorities employed a discourse of ignorance (*cahl*) and civilization (*medeniyet*), and of backwardness and modernity. This renewed focus on (religious and other) education led to a gradual redefinition of laypeople as religious and/or national, and increasingly also as political, actors. The process of vernacularization that had started in the preceding century made it possible, indeed desirable, for religious knowledge to become accessible to laypeople, in particular through simplified statements of the creed, like Mawlana Khalid’s *Aqîdetnamey kurdî*. Later in the nineteenth century, the spread of such accessible religious texts was further facilitated by the use of printing. Thus, among the first texts to be printed in (Kurmanji) Kurdish were several gospel texts printed in the Armenian script by Protestant missionaries.<sup>19</sup>

Famously, the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the remarkably rapid growth of, in particular, the Khalidiyya Naqshbandî *tariqa*, led by Mawlana Khalid (1779–1827 CE), emerging from Kurdish soil but quickly also gaining a foothold in Baghdad, Damascus and Istanbul. The growth of the Naqshbandî order in Kurdistan has been explained from primarily local or regional factors, such as the Ottoman abolition of the Kurdish principalities and the ensuing increase in tribal conflicts, the presence of (evangelical) missionaries among local Christians, and the local penetration of

18 Cf. Bayly (2004: ch. 9). 19 Cf. Malmîsanij (2007: 33–43).

capitalism.<sup>20</sup> But trans-regional factors may also have been at work. Just as the drive to convert southern Iraqi tribes to convert to Twelver Shiism from the late eighteenth century on can be interpreted as a reaction to Wahhâbî pressures, the rapid rise and spread of Khalidî Naqshbandî Sufism may also be seen as at least in part triggered by the challenge of Wahhâbism.<sup>21</sup> There are various indications of early Wahhâbî activity in or near the regions inhabited by Kurds. Thus, Jaubert (1821: 15) already mentions the presence of a number of Wahhâbîs in Erzurum in the year 1805, suggesting that from early on, the Wahhâbî movement was quite active in different parts of the Ottoman Empire.

Shortly after the rise and subsequent ousting of the Wahhâbîs, the Khalidiyya Naqshbandî order emerged – a religious reform movement of a very different character. Religiously, Wahhâbism and Khalidiyya Naqshbandism are diametrically opposed; thus, in his *Kitâb al-tawhîd*, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhâb rejects *taqlîd*, or the slavish imitation of the existing schools of law (*madhâhib*), arguing that to place the authority of religious scholars next to that of scripture amounts to polytheism (*shirk*). In his *Aqîdetnamey kurdî*, by contrast, Mawlana Khalîd argues that not only the pious Companions, but also the founders of the *madhâhib*, and even Sufi sheikhs are *awliyâ*, or ‘friends of God’, and hence deserve the believers’ respect and loyalty.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, later nineteenth- and twentieth-century Naqshbandî writings consistently refer to Wahhâbism and Salafism in a polemical way as *lâ-madhhabîyya*, that is, as rejecting the *madhâhib* in an effort to destroy Islam from within.

Somewhat surprisingly, no clear traces of either Wahhâbî activity or the rise of the Khalidî-Naqshbandî *tariqa* appear in the writings of Molla Mahmûdê Bayazîdî, otherwise one of the most remarkable – and least used – sources of information on rural conditions in the Tanzimat Kurdistan. Of particular relevance in the present context is Bayazîdî’s ethnographic work on Kurdish customs, the *Adet û rusumâtnamee êk radiyye*, and his collection of prose texts, the *Cami‘eya Risaleyan û Hikayetan* (Dost, 2010; Jaba, 1860; cf. Leezenberg, 2020). Bayazîdî focuses on popular religion, or folk beliefs and superstitions of the rural Kurds of his time, generally describing their religious customs as ‘ignorant’ (*cahil*). Unlike Western missionaries or

20 Van Bruinessen (1992: 224–34, 2000: 88).

21 On conversions to Shiism in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Nakash (1994: 25–43); on Khalidiyya Naqshbandism as a reaction to Wahhâbism, cf. Leezenberg (2017).

22 For the text of the *Aqîdetname*, see Karîm (1981).

Ottoman authorities, however, his is not a discourse of linear progress, modernization or civilization (*medeniyet*) – nor, in fact, one of ‘culture’ or ‘folklore’. Rather, he observes a clear decline of religious learning in the Kurdistan of his age and interprets this decline as a sign that the end of times is near (Jaba, 1860: 14). Bayazîdî also contains valuable observations on the relations between Sunni Kurds and others. Thus, he generically classifies the local Christians (mostly Armenians) as *re’aya* (flock); these, he writes, share the same language with the Kurds, and may even act as circumcision godfather (*kirîv*) for them (Dost, 2010: 226, 236). He also makes some brief comments on what he calls ‘the Yezidi group of the Kurds, who are not Muslims but Yezidis’, adding that ‘this group worships Iblîs and calls the Satan ‘Melek Tawûs.’<sup>23</sup> That is, he implicitly, but more unambiguously than either Ibn Taymiyya or Evliya Celebi, qualifies them as infidels (*kâfir*).

Bayazîdî wrote most of his works for Auguste Jaba, the then Russian consul in Erzurum. Thus, to a limited extent, his writings reflect the increasing presence of imperialist powers in the eastern Ottoman Empire, and their increasing interference on behalf of local Christians. Another source of such interference was foreign missionary activity, especially by English-speaking evangelical or Protestant missionaries. Evangelical missionaries in the Ottoman Empire further encouraged education both in local vernaculars and in modern European languages. It appears to have been this missionary activity, in particular, which triggered Ottoman policies of proselytization, and of actively encouraging, or even enforcing, conversion to Hanafi Islam.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the late nineteenth century also witnessed (largely unsuccessful) Ottoman attempts at forced conversion of Yezidis and both Twelver and heterodox Shiites. In the early 1890s, the Ottoman General Ömer Vehbi Pasha undertook a military campaign against the Yezidis of Sinjar, during which he forced the leaders of both Yezidis and Shabak to publicly convert to Sunni Islam.<sup>25</sup> This expedition should probably be seen less as an expression of an individual officer’s religious zeal, let alone a timeless Sunni fanaticism on the part of the Ottoman power elites, than as reflecting an effort to further centralize and homogenize the Ottoman state.<sup>26</sup>

23 ‘Li Kurdistanê ji ekra dan ta’îfeya êzîdîyan ji heyî in ku musulman nînin, êzîdî ne . . . Ew ta’îfa bi perestîya Iblîs dikin û ji şeytan re dibêjin Melek ê Tawûs’ (Dost, 2010: 134).

24 Cf. Deringil (1999: ch. 3). 25 See in particular Deringil (1999: 69–75).

26 In 1905, another Ottoman official, Mustafa Nûrî Pasha, then *vâlî* of Mosul vilayet, wrote a treatise on the Yezidis, which not only describes them as one of Islam’s ‘heretic sects’ (*fîraq-i zalle*), but also as ‘devil worshippers’ (*abede-i Iblîs*), and as infidels among whom sodomy and adultery go unpunished. To the best of my knowledge, this treatise only exists in a German translation (Nûrî Pasha, 1911).

Simultaneously with this new emphasis on Sunni Islam, one may also see increasing efforts to create and spread a specifically Turkish identity. As historian Selim Deringil puts it, 'Ottoman identity assumed an increasingly Turkish character . . . packaged in universalist Islamic terms' (Deringil, 1999: 11). In particular, the Ottoman authorities reinterpreted Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school as the empire's 'official faith' (*mezhep-i resmîyye*) and redefined the Ottoman sultan as the *khalîfa*, that is, the legitimate leader of the entire *umma*, including those Muslims who were not under Ottoman political control. These innovations also informed the pan-Islamic ideas that started gaining popularity in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere from the 1870s on. Although the Ottomans never consistently used pan-Islamism as a foreign policy tool, they tacitly encouraged its spread throughout the Muslim world, in part through the great centres of transnational pilgrimage, Mecca and Medina.

The effects of pan-Islamism in Kurdistan are as yet poorly understood. One event that may at least in part be seen as a reaction to pan-Islam and to other religious policies of both the Ottoman and Qajar empires is Sheikh Ubeydullah's 1880 revolt (cf. Ateş, 2014). This uprising has widely been interpreted as one of the first expressions of Kurdish national aspirations, but it also had clearly and indeed irreducibly religious backgrounds and dimensions. One cause of increasing tensions between Kurds and Armenians had been the Russo–Turkish War (1877–8); but also as a result of the Ottoman policies of Sunni proselytizing and of increasing Qajar attempts to promote Shiite Islam, sectarian tensions mounted, not only between Muslims and Christians but also between Sunnis and Shiites. One foreign contemporary foreign source claimed that Sheikh Ubeydullah's high position in the Naqshbandî *tariqa* made it impossible for the Ottoman authorities to arrest him.<sup>27</sup> In his turn, the sheikh always continued to profess his loyalty to the Ottoman sultan, even if in practice there was a clear mistrust between them. Likewise, the attitudes of the famous Naqshbandî reformer Said Nursi towards pan-Islam and towards developing Turkish and Kurdish nationalism would deserve further study.<sup>28</sup>

In short, newly emerging national identities, including a Kurdish identity, both shaped and were shaped by religious solidarities which themselves were involved in an equally radical process of transformation (cf. Bayly, 2004:

27 Quoted in Ateş (2014: 776).

28 Mardin (1989: 124–126) suggests that Nursi may have been sympathetic to a number of pan-Islamist ideas and policies of Sultan Abdülhamid II, but does not elaborate on this point.

362–3). This interaction between changing concepts of religion and nationality was only to accelerate in the twentieth century.

### The Modern Nation-States

The modern nation-states and new multinational empires that emerged from World War I not only created new national identities, by violent means if necessary; they also brought along a radical reorganization of religion, a redefinition of orthodoxy and heterodoxy and of majority and minority and – last but not least – a rearticulation of individual and collective identities of gender and sexuality.<sup>29</sup> The importance of these new states in shaping and reshaping the religious experience of Kurds and others can hardly be overestimated; thus, members of the same, or religiously very similar, groups undergoing broadly similar processes of social change (urbanization, upward social mobility, increased access to education and increasing integration into the state) have had very different experiences in different states. Religiously, the Alevis in Turkey and the Shabak and Kâkâ'is in Iraq may have much in common, but their twentieth-century social and political trajectories have diverged widely (cf. Leezenberg, 1997). Likewise, Yezidis living in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia, Turkey and Iraq, let alone in Western European diaspora, show qualitatively different developments.

Perhaps the deepest and most radical transformation occurred in the Southern Caucasus. The early Soviet Union, with its policy of *korenizatsiia* (nativization), was as encouraging towards smaller nations as it was repressive towards religion. During the 1920s and 1930s, atheism (*bezbozhnik*) was official state policy; accordingly, early Bolshevik policies were geared towards the creation of modern nationalities as defined by spoken language and by an oral folkloric culture rather than a written literary heritage or traditional religious learning. This process of 'folklorization' of Kurdish national identity not only downplayed or repressed any religiosity among the Kurds, whether Islamic or other, and whether in Kurdish or in other languages; it also downplayed ethnic and sectarian differences between Kurds and Yezidis, treating them as a single nationality in view of their largely shared spoken language. In post-Soviet Armenia, by contrast, the religious and other differences between Yezidis and Kurds of Muslim backgrounds have been

29 Considerations of space preclude a fuller discussion of questions of gender and sexuality in relation to changing religious practices and developing national identities among the Kurds; see Najmabadi (2005) for a classical statement of these questions in the context of Iran.

systematically emphasized, with some Armenian scholars even arguing that Yezidis do not speak a variety of Kurmanji Kurdish but a distinct language, ‘Êzîdîti’.

The secularist and Turkish-nationalist policies of early republican Turkey constituted a hardly less radical attempt at social engineering and nation-building than the avowedly atheist redefinition and construction of nations as folkloric in the early Soviet Union. As is well known, early Kemalist policies were particularly destructive towards the Kurds; they also led to radical changes in religious life among them. The 1924 law no. 430 on the unification of education (*tevhid-i tedrisat*) abolished all madrasas, where literacy in Kurdish had long been cultivated; a 1925 decree ordered the closing down of all Sufi orders, including the Naqshbandî *tariqa*; and a whole series of legal and constitutional measures banned both the public and the private spoken (let alone written) use of the Kurdish language.

Driven by French-inspired positivist zeal, the early Kemalists may well have wished to eradicate popular religiosity altogether; but religious Kurds had different strategies to cope with these dramatically changed circumstances. In the Kurdish-majority provinces, many smaller rural madrasas continued to operate clandestinely, and Kurdish-language texts continued to circulate in handwritten form.<sup>30</sup> Others, most importantly the Nurcu movement, reappeared as informal study groups rather than *tariqas*. Yavuz (2003: ch. 7) has argued that as a result, the present-day Nurcu movement is text-based rather than centred around a charismatic personality; he also sees it as print-based and geared towards modern education rather than based on madrasa learning. Although charismatic leadership has by no means disappeared from twentieth-century Naqshbandî-origin networks (witness the Gülen movement, and witness the veneration among Nurcu members for Said Nursi), it is clear that these networks no longer relied on, and in fact, implicitly contested, the traditional authority of the ulema.

The secularist and Turkish-nationalist policies of the new Kemalist power elites also affected, and in a sense even created, religious minorities. In the new Republic of Turkey, religious or sectarian groups like the Alevis and the Yezidis were no more officially recognized than were linguistically defined ethnic groups like the Kurds. Instead, as Dressler (2015) writes, the Alevis were reconceptualized in a secularist framework as ‘heterodox Muslims’, or

30 Interviews, Kurdish madrasa alumni, Mardin, summer 2009; Hakkari, spring 2011; and Diyarbakir, September 2012. I have also come across a photostat reprint of a madrasa-used manuscript supposedly entitled *Mizan ul-edeb*, which on closer inspection turned out to reproduce a recent handwritten copy in Arabic script of Xani’s *Mem û Zîn*.



as adherents of a 'syncretistic', but originally purely Turkish, shamanistic religion.<sup>31</sup> However, Dressler emphasizes, this redefinition of Alevism as a heterodox religion was primarily the work of Kemalist state actors; it belonged to a broader authoritarian-nationalist hegemonic discourse and was shaped by efforts to build a secular Turkish nation-state. From such modern state-based origins, it also found its way into everyday language use – including later Alevi self-definitions. This policy of 'othering' of Alevis, Dressler continues, reflects the ambivalence of Turkish state policies, which wavered between the recognition of Alevis as a distinct religious minority and the assimilationist attempt to integrate them into a new, national Turkish identity defined as modern and secular. Turkish state discourse on the Alevis, he concludes, was secular and modernist, but could simultaneously appeal to normative concepts of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy.

This ambivalence in state policies and state discourse was reflected in Turkish society. Some Alevi authors expressed misgivings that formal recognition of the Alevis as a minority could lead to doubts about their political loyalty to the Turkish state, or to easier targeting by radical Sunni groups. In 1989, a group of Alevis living in Germany published an 'Alevi manifesto', a passionate plea for the recognition of, and more cultural rights for, the Alevis as a distinct religious group in both Germany and Turkey. The subsequent publication of a Turkish-language version of the manifesto in the Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet* led to a fierce debate in Turkey as well. Some opponents protested against creating any rifts in Turkish society, which, they argued, carried the risk of creating sectarian conflicts like in Northern Ireland or Bosnia. Kurdish-speaking Alevis were as ambivalent about the secular Turkish state (which, some felt, repressed them as Kurds but protected them as Alevis) as about the Kurdish movement emerging in the 1970s and 1980s; they were particularly sensitive to any tacit or explicit attempts to identify Kurdishness with Sunni Islam.<sup>32</sup>

The twentieth-century 'politicization of religion' was a gradual process that did not become clearly visible until the 1980s and after, and accelerated after the end of the Cold War. Politicized, and more specifically

31 Dressler also observes that characterizing Alevism as a 'syncretistic' blending of Islamic and pre-Islamic religious traditions tacitly presupposes that such traditions are rather more clearly defined and bounded than they have in fact been for most of their history. This caveat would seem to apply with equal force to other religious minorities in Kurdistan.

32 For a more detailed discussion, see Massicard (2013).

revolutionary, forms of Islam had started appearing only after World War II, against the background of decolonization, the arrival of Jewish settlers in Palestine and the subsequent creation of the state of Israel, and the Cold War struggle between the liberal (or, some would say, imperialist) West headed by the US and a Communist bloc led by the Soviet Union – a struggle that also shaped much of secular Middle Eastern politics between the 1940s and 1989. These political redefinitions of Islam should not be mistaken for a return to a pre-secular past: they embody novel ideologies and new forms of organization. Thus, both the Muslim Brotherhood (*ikhwân al-muslimîn*) and Salafism (let alone Salafi-jihadism) are qualitatively novel phenomena, shaped by contemporary challenges, by modern education and by new transnational networks, rather than traditional madrasa culture or premodern Sufi orders.

The rise of political Islam in Kurdistan, too, reflects wider world-historical forces and processes; but conversely, these forces took very different shapes and had very different effects in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. The catalyst of this process, of course, was the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran; but for Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, it turns out that the Sunni Afghan jihad against the Soviet occupation of the 1980s was of almost equal importance. Rejecting both liberal-capitalist and Marxist–Leninist models, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran electrified Islamic movements in the wider region. Although in many respects of a specifically Shiite and Iranian character, the revolution exported the idea that Islam was neither a relic from the past nor – in Marxist terms – the opium of the people, but a potentially revolutionary political force. The revolution also triggered a new political rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The first arena for this Saudi–Iranian confrontation, as for the American–Soviet Cold War confrontation, was, of course, Afghanistan. Olivier Roy (1986) has argued that the Afghan mujahedin, rather than being organized along traditional or tribal lines, were affiliated to networks of the Muslim Brothers and the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami. During the war, another form of jihad also emerged, in particular through Abdallah Azzam's *maktab al-khidâmât* (bureau of services) in Peshawar. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this current is the fact that it interprets jihad as armed struggle and considers this struggle an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*) for each Muslim, whether male or female, rather than the collective duty of the *umma* as a whole.<sup>33</sup> A number of Iraqi Kurdish jihadists, most notably Mullah Krekar (pseudonym of Najmaddin Farah), appear to have a connection of some sort to Azzam's Salafi-jihadism.<sup>34</sup>

33 On the rise of Salafi-jihadism, see e.g. Kepel (2000).

34 Leezenberg (2007: 222). For Krekar's own account, see Krekar (2004).

The most remarkable feature about political Islam in Turkey, and by extension among Kurds in Turkey, is that it appears to have developed largely in isolation, not only from the networks of Muslim Brothers and Salafi-jihadism but also from Iranian revolutionary Islam. This may be due in part to a state tradition specific to Turkey, and perhaps to state repression; but perhaps the dominance of Khalidiyya Naqshbandism, which, as Hakan Yavuz (2003: ch. 6) argues, forms the 'matrix' of virtually all forms of political Islam in Turkey, is another broad factor. Ideologically, as noted, this branch of Naqshbandism is clearly opposed to Salafism; but it is also critical of Shiite Islam. More generally, Naqshbandis have generally been politically quietist, seeking state protection or withdrawing from public life rather than seeking the confrontation. Turkish Islamist networks like the Nurcu and Gülen movements have generally rejected not only violent action against the state but any openly political activity. Likewise, the Gülen movement emphasized the need for education and the societal duty of 'service' (*hizmet*) rather than any form of political organization. Despite this studied self-distancing from all political power, it encouraged the infiltration of its followers in the judiciary and the police force, not to mention its setting up of a boarding school network both in Turkey and abroad. These activities were severely curtailed by the 2013 clampdown on the Gülen movement, and rendered illegal in the wake of the failed 2016 coup against Erdoğan. Since this crackdown, Turkish officials have consistently referred to the Gülen movement as 'FETÖ' (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü, or Gülenist Terror Organization), in a sweeping attempt to delegitimize the movement and its members. Turkish persecution of Gülenists has also affected centres of the movement abroad; thus, in the wake of the post-2016 measures, a number of Gülenist schools in Iraqi Kurdistan closed down or changed owners.

The Naqshbandi dislike of both Shiism and Salafism may also serve as a tacit ethnic marker distinguishing Turks and Kurds from Arabs (among whom Salafism commands rather more respect) and (generally Shiite) Iranians; that is, religious identities may overlap with, or discreetly express, ethnic and national differences. There are no detailed studies of the activities of the Nurcu and Gülen movements in the Kurdish south-east; but their appeal has been considerable, despite the fact that, in Kurdish circles, Gülen was widely seen as having a Turkish-nationalist agenda. Thus, the publishing house Nûbihar (founded in the 1990s, and one of the most important religiously inspired Kurdish cultural organizations) has its roots in the Nurcu movement. It has been active in printing new editions of the classics of Kurdish literature and emphasizes that religion (and more specifically an affiliation with the

Shafi'ite *madhhab* and with Naqshbandism) is an integral component of Kurdish national identity. As one of the speakers memorably stated during a 2012 Nûbihar conference on language, religion and national identity, 'Kurdistan is Naqshbandistan' (*Kurdistan Neqshbendîstan e*).<sup>35</sup>

Apart from these groups, more overtly politicized and more violent forms of Sunni Islam also appeared among the Kurds in Turkey. The most important of these is undoubtedly the so-called Kurdish Hezbollah (KH), which emerged in the Batman area during the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> Although its members appear to have been inspired by translations of works by revolutionary Islamists like Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati, they had few if any organizational links with either the Muslim Brothers in the Arab world or any revolutionary organization originating in, or associated with, Iran (cf. Leezenberg, 2017: 41). In the early 1990s, KH's violent confrontation with the PKK gave it the reputation of colluding with the state's counterinsurgency; but whatever the truth of such allegations, by the end of the decade, it had largely ceased its activities. In 2000, its leader, Hüseyin Velioglu, was killed in a police raid, and thousands of its members were reportedly arrested; but from 2003 on, KH re-emerged in a new shape and in a new national political landscape. Although KH remained outlawed as a 'terrorist organization', its sympathizers regrouped, first under the guise of the Mustazaf-Der association, and after the latter's 2010 closure by a Turkish court, as the Hüda-Par political party (Hür Dava Partisi, or Free Cause Party). Although this group could mobilize large numbers of sympathizers in street demonstrations, Hüda-Par performed poorly in both local and national elections.

Developments among Kurds in Syria and Iraq were very different: for one thing, the Naqshbandî *tariqa* had not been outlawed here but had continued to exist as such. Moreover, in these self-proclaimed Arab states, Kurds were rather more exposed to Arab-originating networks like the Muslim Brotherhood than in Turkey. In Syria, the Muslim Brothers' armed revolt against the al-Assad regime, which started in 1979, left an imprint almost as deep as the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In the violent confrontation between the Muslim Brothers and the regime, which culminated in the 1982 Hama massacre, Syrian Kurds were – whether or not correctly – widely seen as having sided with the regime by both secular Sunni Arabs and MB sympathizers.<sup>37</sup> There are no indications

35 Personal observation, Diyarbakir, September 2012.

36 The most detailed account in English is Kurt (2017). See also Kurt's Chapter 20 in this volume.

37 Thus, in Sunni Arab circles, the story went that Hafez al-Assad's brother Rifaat had relied in part on ethnically Kurdish elite troops in crushing the Hama revolt.

that the Syrian Muslim Brothers received support from Saddam Hussein, al-Assad's arch-rival; in Iraq, the Brotherhood continued to face close scrutiny if not outright persecution during this period. Only during the 1990s does the Iraqi regime appear to have given the Muslim Brotherhood more leeway; but there is little reliable information on this period.<sup>38</sup>

One figure who was indicative of Kurdish attitudes towards Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood was the famous religious scholar Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti (1929–2013), who, as his name indicates, hailed from Jezira Botan. After his father had fled the persecutions of both Kurds and clerics in the new Republic of Turkey, al-Bouti was born on the Syrian side of the border in the Jazira region. Educated in Damascus and in the Azhar University in Cairo, al-Bouti remained on the frontier between Kurdish and Arab identity, and between Naqshbandî and Salafî forms of Islam. Politically, he always remained close to the al-Assad regime, perhaps based on a conviction that religious leaders should be loyal to whichever secular forces are in power. In his sermons, in his regular TV appearances and in his writings, he was invariably critical of the Muslim Brothers and of Salafism, let alone Salafî-jihadism, up to his assassination in 2013, in the midst of the Syrian civil war. Significantly, and like earlier Naqshbandîs, he refers to Salafism as *lâ-madhhabiyya*, and as 'the biggest threat to the sharia'.<sup>39</sup>

Rather less attention has been paid to al-Bouti's Kurdish background and activities. He himself has given an account of this background in his 1998 account of his father's life, *Hâdhâ wâlidî* [This is my father]. This work clearly shows al-Bouti's Naqshbandî origins, even though he has been vocal in his criticisms of what he called the backwardness of early twentieth-century Sufi orders. Thus, in the 1950s, al-Bouti also published an Arabic prose rendering of Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*, which toned down not only references to Kurdish national aspirations but also to mysticism (al-Bouti, 1982).

Another high Syrian cleric of Kurdish origins was Ahmad Kaftaro (1915–2004), who for many years was Grand Mufti of Syria. Kaftaro, too, was a member of the Naqshbandî *tariqa*. Although the Kurdish background of religious leaders like al-Bouti and Kaftaro was neither widely publicized nor systematically papered over, it may be indicative of a wider tendency among Kurds and Arabs to sympathize with, respectively, Naqshbandî and Salafî-

38 On the relations between the Iraqi Ba'ath regime and the Muslim Brothers, see al-'Azami (2002) and Helfont (2018). Discussion of MB mobilization of among Iraq's Kurds, however, is absent from both analyses.

39 Al-Bouti (2009). For more discussion, see Christmann (1998).

inspired forms of Islam. Although one should not overstate such tendencies, they do seem significant, both in Syria and in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In Iraq, unlike in Syria, neither the Muslim Brothers nor the Salafis or Salafi-jihadists had gained a significant following, whether among Kurds or among Arabs. Although in its earliest phase, the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood had claimed to be open to both Arabs and Kurds, and both Sunnis and Shiites, the leading body of the Islamic Party that was formed from among its ranks overwhelmingly hailed from the Sunni Arab triangle, in particular the city of Ramadi.<sup>40</sup> It was only after the 1991 uprising that MB presence became more visible both in Iraqi Kurdistan and in the parts of Iraq that remained under Saddam's control. In the Kurdish-controlled north, the most dramatic development was the rise of the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan or IMIK (*Bizûtnewey Îslamî le Kurdistanî 'Irâq*), founded in 1979 and headed by Mullah Othman from Halabja. In 1987, Mullah Othman had called for a jihad against the Iraqi regime; but after the March 1988 chemical attack on Halabja, Mullah Othman and his followers had fled to Iran.

Although IMIK spokesmen claimed that Mullah Othman had developed his own form of Salafi-jihadism, both its ideology and organizational form appear to have originated in MB networks. IMIK writings abound in references to Azzam and Sa'îd Hawa, one of the leaders of the Syrian branch of the MB.<sup>41</sup> Mullah Othman himself appears to have made contact with the MB during his studies at the Azhar University in Cairo. His precise links with the *Jamaat-e-Islami* and the Afghan mujahedin are unclear; late in the 1980s, however, he appears to have turned away from the Muslim Brotherhood after the latter failed to condemn the Halabja attack. More generally, Iraq's 1990 occupation of Kuwait and the ensuing 1991 Gulf War appears to have led to a split in the ranks of the Muslim Brothers. The aftermath of that war presented not only Iraq's secular Kurdish parties but also local Salafi-jihadists with unprecedented political opportunities. In the 1992 regional elections, IMIK received 5 per cent of the vote, just short of the 7 per cent threshold; but it was the single biggest party after the KDP and PUK, and also commanded a sizeable militia. In the violent climate of party infighting during the 1990s, there were several rounds of deadly clashes between IMIK and PUK forces, primarily in the Halabja area.

Initially less dramatically present, and certainly less violent, but in the long run more enduringly active, were the local Kurdish offshoots of the Muslim

40 Al-'Azami (2002: esp. 167). On the Muslim Brothers in Iraqi Kurdistan, see also Leezenberg (2007: 213–23).

41 On Azzam, see Kepel (2000: ch. 6, esp. 145–47); on Hawa, see Weismann (1993).

Brotherhood. The most important among these were the Rabitay Islami Kurd, a charity organization founded in 1992, and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (Yekgirtuy Islami), founded in 1994 by Salaheddin Bahaeddin. Unlike IMIK, Rabita and Yekgirtu rejected violent tactics, and had no militia of their own; rather, they mobilized in civil society, and participated in the regional and local electoral process, initially with considerable success.

Given their location straddling the Iranian border, IMIK and its offshoots primarily received financial and other support from Iran, unlike the Yekgirtu and Rabita, which during the 1990s reportedly received funding from wealthy sponsors in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In the late 1990s, several Salafi-jihadi groups broke away from IMIK. The most important of these was headed by, respectively, Mullah Krekar and 'Ali Bapir. In the wake of the 11 September 2001 assaults in New York and Washington, DC, and in the run-up to the 2003 war against Iraq, PUK propaganda successfully portrayed these groups as the missing link between Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the al-Qaeda network. The remaining Salafi-jihadi groups in the border areas were targeted by American air bombings, and many of their remaining personnel were killed in combat or captured. Mullah Krekar fled abroad; 'Ali Bapir spent a number of years in prison, and subsequently entered the civilian political process in the region. From this, one might have cautiously concluded that ten years after the ousting of Saddam Hussein, Sunni political Islam and Salafi-jihadism were largely a spent force in the region. The dramatic developments of 2014, however, put the lie to such conclusions.

### *Religion in Post-IS Kurdistan*

For a long time, foreign observers depicted Iraqi Kurdistan as a beacon of stability, prosperity and democratic liberties in a region otherwise marked by sectarian conflicts and dictatorial regimes. Such pictures were always overly optimistic, in that they overlooked both the authoritarianism of the leading Kurdish parties and unresolved political questions, like the status of Kirkuk, Ninewa plain and Sinjar. They also largely overlooked the warning signals of rising jihadist violence, which escalated into the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State or DAESH (acronym of al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi-l-'Iraq wa-l-Shâm) in northern Iraq and Syria from 2013 on.<sup>42</sup> The genocidal violence perpetrated by IS warriors against Shiites, Christians and especially Yezidis has rightly drawn a lot of – mostly journalistic – attention. It should be noted,

42 For an overview of the pre-2014 situation, see the various contributions in Omarkhali (2014).

however, that jihadist violence against Christians, Yazidis and different Shiite or Shiite-leaning groups in northern Iraq had already been on the rise since the emergence of a Sunni Arab insurgency against the American military presence after 2005. This insurgency had only partly been crushed or contained by the 2007 'Surge' led by the American army. In June 2014, IS forces overran Mosul; then, in August of the same year, they attacked and occupied Sinjar and Ninewa plain, which had been under *de facto* Kurdish control despite being *de jure* part of Sunni Arab-ruled Ninewa governorate.

The 2014 IS offensive was not only a human tragedy and a military disaster; it also marked – and, paradoxically, masked – a crisis of legitimacy of the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. By early 2014, popular disaffection with the dominant parties' corruption and inability to compromise had become widespread. In the ongoing conflict between Baghdad and Erbil about control over oil sales, the al-Maliki administration had discontinued the monthly payments to the Kurdistan Region in January 2014, causing an abrupt and acute financial crisis: overnight, the KRG lost the ability to pay the salaries of the estimated 65 per cent of the labour force in direct state employment. Simultaneously, an ongoing political conflict between, in particular, the KDP and Goran, largely paralysed the regional parliament. Yet, there were surprisingly few sustained protests against KRG policies or against the corruption of officials. In this sense, the acute and violent threat posed by IS may have been a blessing in disguise for local elites.

The August 2014 IS offensive appears to have directly and deliberately challenged the KRG's resolve to protect the less than unambiguously Kurdish minority groups in areas *de facto* and/or *de jure* under its control. It was probably no coincidence that the August offensive primarily targeted Sinjar and Ninawa plain, home to Yazidis, Christians, Shabak and other minorities, rather than areas primarily inhabited by Sunni Kurds. If indeed it was such a test, the KRG failed dismally: in particular among Yazidis, one encounters a lot of resentment about the peshmergas' failure to provide adequate protection for the Sinjar population during the August 2014 IS onslaught.<sup>43</sup>

Subsequently, however, the regional government did take a number of legal measures in order to better protect religious minorities. For years, it had promoted the public expression of Sunnī Islamic piety, for example by granting tax advantages to affluent individuals who funded the construction

43 For a detailed account of the August 2014 events, and of the political pressures surrounding attempts to protect the Yazidi population, see Schmidinger (2019).



of mosques; but in 2015, the regional parliament passed a 'Law for the protection of the rights of religious minorities in Iraqi Kurdistan' (*qanûn himâyat huqûq al-mukawinât fî Kurdistân al-`Irâq*). The law includes both 'national groups' (*al-majmû`ât al-qawmiyya*), listing Turcomans, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Assyrians and Armenians; and 'religious and sectarian groups' (*al-majmû`ât al-dîniyya wa-l-tâ`ifiyya*), including 'Christians, Yezidis, "Mandaean Sabaeans", Kâkâ'îs, Shabak, Faylîs, Zoroastrians and others'; it lists a number of measures to protect members of these groups, with the aim of 'promoting a spirit of respect, tolerance and coexistence among the citizens of Iraqi Kurdistan'.<sup>44</sup> Some have argued that such measures were too little, too late; some critics even rejected them as mere window dressing, given the dominance and authoritarian character of the ethnic Kurdish parties currently in power in the region.<sup>45</sup>

At the societal level, the IS onslaught appears to have had far-reaching consequences; but to the extent that these can be clearly perceived, they have not yet been studied in detail.<sup>46</sup> The most dramatic immediate effect has undoubtedly been the emergence – or, as its adherents claim, re-emergence – of Zoroastrianism in the region. Earlier Kurdish secular nationalists had claimed Zoroastrianism as the original religion of the Kurds, and the Yezidi faith as the survival of this original Kurdish religiosity; but as a living religion, Zoroastrianism had long been absent from Mesopotamia. After 2014, however, increasing numbers of Iraqi Kurds not only started openly identifying as Zoroastrians, but also claiming that their religious tradition had never really disappeared, and had continued to be practised clandestinely.<sup>47</sup> A fire temple was opened in Sulaimaniya, and editions of Zoroastrian sacred texts and studies on Zarathustra – mostly translated from Persian – could be found in bookstores all over the region.<sup>48</sup> Spokespersons of local Zoroastrianism openly acknowledge the protection and financial support they receive from the regional authorities, and proudly declare that 'Zoroastrianism is the mother of all religions and the father of all philosophies,' alluding, respectively, to the near-contemporary Vedic tradition in Sanskrit and to Nietzsche's

44 For the Arabic-language text of the law, see <http://perleman.org/files/articles/210118092548.pdf>.

45 Interviews, anonymous local informants, Sulaimaniya, Duhok, October 2019.

46 For a preliminary stocktaking, see the papers collected in Sevdeen and Schmidinger (2019).

47 The new Zoroastrianism is among the best documented of the post-IS religious developments; see Szanto (2018). In fairness, it should be noted that local Zoroastrians fiercely contest these analyses by foreign scholars.

48 See, for example, Abdulhemid (2016), a translation from a Persian rendering of selections from the *Gathas*, the oldest Zoroastrian texts, originally written in Avestan.

writings, in particular, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>49</sup> This Zoroastrian tradition, however, is clearly invented: it has no links with Zoroastrian communities in Iran and India or with the existing Zoroastrian leadership, and it has no affinity with Nietzsche's radical critique of religion. Rather, its appearance may reflect a wish among a number of Iraqi Kurds to distance themselves from Islam, which has increasingly come to be perceived as a specifically Arab religion, without falling into a complete and publicly professed atheism. The number of actual adherents of Zoroastrianism in the region is unknown.

A second consequence is the further societal weakening of political Islam, and of Salafism in particular. Even more strongly than before, Islamist activities were constrained and held under close scrutiny. In the 2018 regional elections, the Kurdistan Islamic Union lost six of their eleven seats in parliament; 'Ali Bapîr's Komal, due in part to its solid backing in Halabja region, gained one seat, reaching a total of seven. Clearly, political Islam seems past its heyday in the region; but it is unlikely to disappear completely. It remains to be seen whether new forms of depoliticized Islam will develop as a reaction to the extreme, and violent, politicization of the faith by groups like IS.

A third post-IS development is an increasingly openly proclaimed atheism. Especially among younger generations, the confrontation with IS atrocities has not only led to questions about the morality of the religion in the name of which these were committed but even about the very existence of God. Finally, a fourth reaction appears to be the strengthening of (evangelical) Christianity. Nowadays, evangelical missionaries can openly proselytize, especially in the Ain Kawa suburb of Erbil; and local evangelicals feel increasingly encouraged to voice theological criticisms of Islam.

At present, however, it is impossible to state on what scale these reactions have occurred, or to predict how enduring they will be. All of these tendencies, it should be noted, already existed in the years prior to the IS assault; but in the last few years, they appear to have become more openly allowed, if not actively encouraged, by local authorities.

Finally, the confrontation with IS has brought to the fore questions of gender and sexuality. During the battle for Kobanî and in Rojava more generally, the stark opposition between female YPG guerrillas and male bearded IS warriors was lost on few onlookers; but it remains to be seen to what extent the gender equality agenda of PKK and PYD will enduringly change gender relations in local Kurdish society, especially in interaction with

49 Interview, Zoroastrian spokesperson, Duhok, October 2018.

religious values. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the figure of the peshmerga as an ideal of patriotism and masculinity has clearly been losing appeal. Since 1991, an entire generation of Kurdish youths has grown up in the absence of national mobilization and guerrilla warfare against a non-Kurdish enemy. Hence, neither the 2014 confrontation with IS nor the 2017 run-up to the referendum for independence has led to significant military mobilization among the region's youths, despite the militant and military rhetoric that surrounded both events. If anything, male–female relations appear to have become more conservative, and more often enforced by violent means, than in the decades preceding *de facto* independence; but one should beware of reducing such changing patterns of gender-based violence to a timeless patriarchy, to tribal conceptions of gendered honour or to religiously sanctioned norms of male and female behaviour.

Perhaps the clearest indication of these changes is the work of 2018 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nadia Murad. In the 2014 IS assault, Murad was captured and sold into sexual slavery after most of her male relatives had been murdered by IS forces. After escaping from captivity and resettling in Germany, she became one of the most vocal activists on behalf of the Yezidis, calling for help for enslaved women and for the prosecution of the perpetrators (Murad, 2017). In publicly speaking out about her experiences, however, she also challenged taboos in her own community concerning female sexuality. It briefly looked like her and others' efforts would be successful: in April 2019, the Yezidi Supreme Spiritual Council issued a statement that declared, or was widely read as saying, that all victims of the IS genocide would be welcomed back into the Yezidi community, including rape victims and their offspring. A mere few days later, however, a retraction (or rectification) followed, stating that the declaration should not be read as allowing children born out of rape by IS members as members of the Yezidi community.

Such developments suggest that underlying questions concerning religion, especially in interaction with ethnic identity and gender, remain contested. It seems unlikely that, with the fall of IS, radical political Islam will have been neutralized and domesticated once and for all; but in this volatile region, it is risky to make such predictions with any degree of confidence.

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