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Transformations in Minority Religious Leadership

The Yezidis, Shabak, and Assyrians in Northern Iraq

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Abstract

This paper discusses three religious communities in Northern Iraq that are characterized by the shared fate of having been targeted by the 2014 “Islamic State” (IS) offensive. These events dramatically brought home the vulnerability of these communities in post-Saddam Iraq; but the precarious status of these groups was already painfully visible even to the most casual observer prior to the IS onslaught. In this paper, I trace the rather different trajectories of these—initially broadly comparable—minority groups, with a focus on the changing articulation and legitimization of religious leadership. I do so by pointing out some of the longer-term tendencies among these groups, while treating religious leadership in terms of patronage.

Keywords

Iraq – Kurdistan Region – Islamic State – religious minorities – patronage

This paper deals with the transformation of religious leadership among three ethno-religious communities in Northern Iraq, against the backdrop of developments in the Iraqi state and in the autonomous Kurdistan region. I will be discussing, first, the Yezidis, a heterodox group partly living in Sinjar—or, as they themselves call it, Shingal—region west of Mosul, whose main sanctuary is located in Lalesh or Shaykh Adi in the foothills north of Mosul; second, the Shabak, a *ghulât* (heterodox Shi’ite) community concentrated in a number of villages and towns east of Mosul up to Eski Kalak; and, third, the Assyrian Christians, in particular the Christian communities living on Ninewa plain, concentrated in Hamdaniya district. These three communities not only live

in shared or adjacent regions, like the Ninewa plain, Badinan, and Sinjar; they also live on the frontier between predominantly Arab- and Kurdish-inhabited areas. Hence, with the development of the modern, and increasingly Arab-nationalist, Iraqi state and the emergence of the Kurdish national movement, they were also similarly affected by rivaling Arab and Kurdish political claims. Finally, all three groups were among those hit hardest by the 2014 Islamic State (IS) onslaught against Kurdish-held territory.

Much existing research on religious minorities, especially when in the form of institutional analyses, is state-oriented—or statist—in character, insofar as it focuses on institutionalized relations between religious community representatives and central state authorities. Often enough, it also introduces tacit normative assumptions about the liberal and/or bureaucratic character of the state. In the case of present-day Iraq, however, such a perspective is problematic for a number of reasons. First, one cannot assume the state as an unproblematic given here: at present, there is on the one hand, hardly such a thing as a functioning Iraqi state to begin with, and, on the other, there are various other state-like, or quasi-state-like, actors present in the area. This becomes particularly clear in the case of Northern Iraq: apart from the tumultuous relations between the Iraqi state and the Kurdistan Regional Government, the region is marked by extensive interference of neighboring countries like Iran and Turkey; by a self-proclaimed (though not recognized) “Islamic State;” by non-state actors, like foreign NGOs; and by movements like the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which, with their ideology of “democratic autonomy,” claim to reject state power altogether.

Second, in liberal settings, religious leaders are generally presumed to act as the legitimate representatives of communities in their dealings with a state likewise presumed to be legitimate; but in a setting that is as conflict-ridden, violent, and authoritarian as Iraq is and has been over the decades, legitimacy cannot be taken for granted. Hence, instead of presuming institutions to be stable and legitimate, one may perhaps more fruitfully look at religious leaders as a particular kind of power broker, and thus ask exactly how legitimacy is produced and reproduced in the first place. Analytically, the concept of patronage may be useful here, except that, in the way it has been employed in the literature, it generally assumes too strict a dichotomy between, on the one hand, the formal and institutionalized power of an impersonal and bureaucratic state taken to be legitimate, and, on the other, informal relations basically seen as illegitimate, and/or as perennially renegotiated, even by the actors involved (see Wolf 1966; Gilson 1977; and Leezenberg 2007: 151–79). In the setting of Iraq, such dichotomies lose much of their plausibility if not clarity.

If we look at religious leadership among Northern Iraq’s religious minorities through the prism of patronage, the main challenge minority leaders face

is not only to keep their congregations or communities together, but also to protect them against outside forces, most importantly the state and state-like actors. In such terms, one need not presume that interactions with the state apparatus are predicated on legitimacy, mutual recognition, and/or consent. Such a perspective also suggests that the 2014 IS offensive was among the gravest challenges the leadership of these communities have ever faced: to what extent were they able to guarantee the well-being, if not the physical survival, of their followers?

All three cases, I argue below, can indeed be fruitfully analyzed in terms of patronage relations in interaction with an evolving Iraqi state and other state-like actors; but despite these similar backgrounds and features, the groups under discussion have followed markedly different trajectories. A first factor that has affected these communities rather differently is the confrontation between the Iraqi state and the Kurdish national movement. All cases were increasingly forced to take sides in this, but the terms and conditions in which they had to do so varied considerably over the decades, and most dramatically with the rise, decades-long rule, and eventual ousting of the Ba'athist state. A second factor is the increase in literacy and access to state-based education. Initially, education was provided by the modern state of Iraq; the most important of these initiatives was a widely publicized drive to eradicate illiteracy in the 1970s and 1980s, which it claimed to have reduced by some 23 percent by 1987.¹ As Iraqi state education was mostly if not exclusively in Arabic, this literacy drive was also perceived as an attempt at assimilating non-Arab population groups. From 1991, education in a large part of Northern Iraq was provided by the newly ruling Kurdish parties who, in 2005, would be constitutionally recognized as the legitimate authorities in the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The minorities in the disputed frontier zone between central government-controlled territory and the Kurdistan region came to face new assimilationist pressures.

A third variable that differentiates these three communities is the role of the diaspora. The Aramaic-speaking Christians of the Middle East have had a long history of emigration to Europe and elsewhere, which started already in the nineteenth century. In recent decades, the Assyrian community in the United States in particular has been quite vocal, in part because until shortly after 2014, the patriarchate of the Church of the East was established in Chicago.

1 UNESCO (n.d.). See also the statistics provided by the World Bank's *Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey 2007*, according to which some 23 percent of (rural) Iraqis were illiterate in 2007. As a result of the international sanctions imposed in 1991 and the enduring instability following the 2003 war, illiteracy rates in post-Saddam Iraq may actually be higher than they were in the late 1980s.

The Yezidis have a rather shorter history of migration to Europe, but at present are hardly less active. From the 1970s on, Yezidis migrated to Western Europe, and in particular settled in (Western) Germany, at first from Southeastern Turkey, and later also from Northern Iraq and to a lesser extent the post-Soviet Caucasus. Already before the 2014 offensive, they had developed a very active and well-organized diaspora community. The Shabak, by contrast, had witnessed rather smaller numbers emigrating to Western countries. Most of these left Iraq after the 2003 war and the gradual escalation of sectarian violence in the Mosul region; moreover, they had hardly developed any diaspora organizations as of 2017.

Below, I trace some of these converging and diverging patterns of development. Following some theoretical discussion, I first trace the recent history of these three groups, with particular attention to the renegotiation or redefinition of the authority of their religious leaders and to their interactions with the state or state-like actors. Second, I describe the structural fault lines that marked the region and affected the communities living there in the years following 2003. Finally, I sketch the effects of the 2014 IS offensive. Given the lack of detailed and reliable information (let alone quantitative data), the present study is necessarily rather preliminary and exploratory in character.

The Yezidis

From early on, the Yezidis have caught the attention of missionaries and captured the imagination of orientalists. Because of their dualist beliefs or tendencies, this heterodox group has long been called “devil worshipers” (*shaytanperest*) by their Muslim neighbors, who claim that the “Peacock Angel” (Melek Tawûs) they worship is identical to the Qur’anic Satan (*Shaytan*) or Iblîs. Although the Yezidis themselves categorically deny this, there are undoubtedly dualist aspects or elements to their religion. These have been seen by many as remnants of a pre-Islamic Iranian religion, and more specifically of Zoroastrians; but they are historically and theologically more plausibly explained as having arisen from the Sufî view of Iblîs as only apparently a principle of evil: in refusing God’s *command* to bow for Adam, Iblîs was the only angel to obey God’s *will* that one should not worship anyone other than God (Awn 1983).²

2 Drower (1941) provides a folk version of the story, depicting Iblîs’s refusal to bow for Adam and the latter’s failed attempts to trick him into doing so, in rather more mundane terms.

Earlier claims about Zoroastrian origins were rejected by scholars like Roger Lescot (1975) and John Guest (1987), who firmly located the development of the Yezidi community within medieval Islamic history. A later generation of scholars, however, including Philip Kreyenbroek, Christine Allison, and Khanna Omarkhali, have, in a sense, returned to the earlier tradition, emphasizing the pre-Islamic Iranian aspects and elements of the Yezidi faith. The relative merits of these rival claims—which, it should be noted, are not necessarily mutually exclusive—need not concern us since our focus is on questions of religious leadership and authority.

Famously, the Yezidis know a strict religious hierarchy, or “caste system” as it has been called. At the apex is the supreme religious leader, usually referred to as the *baba shaykh*, who stands along the supreme worldly leader, the *mîr*. There appears to be no clearly defined division of labor between these two supreme leaders; I am also not aware of any conflicts ever arising between them. Below the *baba shaykh* are the castes, or classes, of, respectively, the *shaykhs*, the *pîrs*, the *qawwâls*, and the *faqîrs*. Traditionally, all of these castes were illiterate, as there has long been a taboo on literacy in the Yezidi community.

The Yezidi caste system may be seen, and has been described, as an institutionalized and religiously sanctioned system of patronage—if “institutionalized patronage” did not sound like a contradiction in terms for those who view patronage as by definition non-institutional and illegitimate even to its participants. Seen in this way, the fact that every Yezidi, male or female, is bound from the moment of birth to a *pîr* and a *shaykh*, who—despite generally being illiterate themselves—provide spiritual guidance and worldly advice in return for financial contributions, may be analyzed as, or reduced to, a religiously articulated and sanctioned patronage system. Thus, C.J. Edmonds—who, it should be kept in mind, was a British mandate administrator often in conflict with local rulers and middlemen—describes this arrangement as “giving the impression of a clever swindle, planned to enable a few privileged families to live as parasites on a credulous community discouraged by a religious taboo from learning to read and write” (1967: 7–8). With regard to the community’s supreme head, the *mîr*, Edmonds does not mince his words either: the previous head, *Mîr Sa’îd Beg*, he writes, was a “debauched profligate” who spent the money he expropriated from his followers on drink and dancing girls in Mosul. It is up to the reader to decide whether Edmonds’ words are the unmasking of religious hypocrisy or merely the condescending rhetoric of a colonial administrator; but they point to the importance of the active maintenance of illiteracy in sustaining traditional Yezidi religious authority until well into the twentieth century.

There has been much talk of the Yezidi community's alleged two "sacred books," the *Mashafê Resh* and the *Kitâb al-jihwa*, but these have been dismissed on rather convincing grounds as forgeries.³ Present-day Yezidis in Northern Iraq, however, including men of religion, assert that works of these titles by Shaykh 'Adi exist, or have existed, even if they have not read or seen them themselves (Açikyildiz 2014: 89). The first known copies of Yezidi histories or "holy books" were, in fact, written in Arabic and Syriac rather than Kurdish by late nineteenth-century Christian priests, and amounted to either transcriptions of oral traditions or outright forgeries. Early in the twentieth century, the Carmelite priest Père Anastase Marie published a Kurdish-language version of the two sacred books; but this version was written in the contemporary Sulaimanî dialect rather than, for example, the Shingalî variety of Northern Kurdish spoken among local Yezidis themselves. But whatever the authenticity and interest of these early sources, written texts played at best a marginal role in Yezidi religious life. For long, the Yezidis were an almost entirely illiterate community, and were criticized for their "proverbial ignorance" by Western missionaries and Iraqi modernists alike. Indicative of this pervasive illiteracy is C.J. Edmonds's description of a ritual he witnessed at Lalesh, during the culmination of which he watched the worshipers hold up and kiss a "sacred text;" when he subsequently was allowed to inspect that text himself, he found it to be nothing other than some official Ottoman government document of a purely administrative rather than religious character (Edmonds 1967: 55).

Given this pervasive and carefully maintained illiteracy among the Yezidis, it stands to reason that the formation of the modern Iraqi nation state, and the concomitant increased access to schooling, posed a serious challenge to the Yezidi religious leadership. Although detailed studies do not exist, there are indications that the urbanization, social mobility, and increased access to literacy characteristic of monarchic and especially republican Iraq have exercised a secularizing influence, which in the Yezidi case involved not only the weakening of the social power of the community leaders, but also an assimilation to an Arabic-speaking and Sunni Muslim environment. In particular after the 1961 outbreak of an armed Kurdish insurgency, the Yezidis, and the other minorities under consideration, were increasingly exposed to the escalating confrontation between the Arab nationalism of successive central governments and the Kurdish nationalism of the insurgents. Although these nationalisms

3 There is, however, an authentic twelfth-century Arabic-language work of the same title, *Kitâb al-jihwa*, by the founder of the Yezidi community, Shaykh 'Adî; but this work bears all the hallmarks of orthodox Sunni Sufism, and contains none of the cosmological, angelical, or eschatological doctrines characteristic of the present-day Yezidi faith.

were modernist and secular—if not militantly anti-clerical, anti-religious, or atheist—both sides claimed the Yezidis as theirs on religious or theological grounds. The former argued that the Yezidis, having descended from Lebanese shaykhs, were really Arabs; and the latter asserted that they were descendants of Zoroastrians, and hence the most authentic Kurds.

Behind these political developments, socioeconomic and demographic changes occurred that were, though perhaps less visible, at least as dramatic in their impact. Most importantly, the rise of literacy and the appearance of new media appear to have had an important influence on the Yezidi community and its leaders. Omarkhali (2014) has discussed in somewhat greater detail how changes in the systems of transmission of religious knowledge and, more specifically, the spread of printing and various media of communication, have led to wholly new ways of legitimizing religious authority among the Yezidis. After World War II, scholars started recording, transcribing, and publishing Yezidi religious hymns, songs, and narratives, at first in Soviet Armenia, and later in Ba'athist Iraq and Kurdish-ruled Iraqi Kurdistan. It is an open question to what extent this “textualization” of the Yezidi faith has affected the religious life of the community at large, whether in Iraq, in Armenia, or in diaspora.

Although there is some talk of written religious texts (*mishûr*) anxiously guarded by the pîrs, most Yezidi religious “texts” used to be transmitted orally by another group of religious specialists, the *qawlbêj*. Omarkhali argues that the spread of writing and printing, and of media like radio, television, and the internet, has redirected attention among the audience of these texts away from the anonymous transmission of traditional knowledge to the personality and qualities of individual *qawlbêjs*. Put differently: the authority of Yezidi *qawlbêjs* at least is no longer seen as self-evident and passed on hereditarily; rather, religious authority, and indeed legitimacy, becomes increasingly dependent on one's activities on social media.⁴ On the whole, it seems, these processes have also gradually restricted, if not eroded, the authority of both the pîr and the baba shaykh, and have subsequently forced the Yezidi leadership to adapt to new technologies and demographic realities.

The role of the diaspora in these developments is a very complex one. Even if one disregards the distinct trajectory of the Yezidis in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia, and its possible influence on the Yezidi community in Iraq, it is clear that the expatriate communities, especially in Germany, play an increasingly important role. Yezidis in Germany are concentrated in Lower Saxony and

4 Omarkhali (2014: 73–75); she does not, however, systematically differentiate these tendencies among Yezidis in Iraqi Kurdistan, in Armenia, and in Western European diaspora, even though, obviously, they live in very different political and socioeconomic conditions.

North Rhine Westphalia, where they have acquired enough critical mass to become a significant local factor. In 2007, a “Zentralrat der Jeziden in Deutschland” (Central Council of Yezidis in Germany) was founded. The prime demand of virtually all these groups is the recognition of the Yezidis as a distinct religious community, and of the persecutions they have been facing over the decades. One might think that these organizations strengthen both the religious identity of the Yezidis and the authority of their traditional leadership, but this is not necessarily the case. One can observe a distinct conservatism among diaspora Yezidis, especially when it comes to matters of gender and honor: there have been cases of blood feud, arranged marriage, and honor killing among the German Yezidi community in the recent past. Recently, it seems, challenges have appeared, not so much against the religious leadership as against its association with the Kurdistan Regional Government. Here, as elsewhere, the rivalry between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has become increasingly visible over the years.⁵ It seems that none of these organizations openly undermines either the community’s worldly or religious leadership’s authority, but it would be a topic for further exploration to trace in more detail how religious authority is rearticulated in this very different setting of intra-Kurdish party rivalry.

One final aspect of Yezidi community maintenance should be mentioned: the role of gender. The Yezidis are a strictly endogamous group, and are willing to protect what they perceive as the purity of their community by violent means if necessary. Thus, in 2007, Du’a Khalil Aswad, a seventeen-year old Yezidi girl, was stoned to death by members of her own community, having been accused of trying to elope with a Sunni Muslim boy. The murder, video footage of which soon started circulating on the internet, was condemned by the KRG and by Amnesty International. It also provoked retaliatory violence against Yezidis: later in the same month, alleged Salafi insurgents massacred twenty-three Yezidi men on a bus returning from a Mosul textile factory; and, in August 2007, a twin truck bombing assault was carried out against the Yezidi villages of Kahtaniya and Jazîra, killing almost seven hundred Yezidi civilians. The latter was claimed to be an act of revenge for the stoning by its perpetrators (Amnesty International UK 2007; BBC News 2007). Clearly, for the Yezidis, women were and are a concern of collective honor: they are seen as guarding the purity of Yezidis as an ethnic group. As we shall see below, IS was to systematically exploit this sensitive issue in its 2014 offensive.

5 See, among others, Kreyenbroek (2009), who, however, has few concrete things to say about the rearticulation of, and possible challenges to, religious authority in diaspora.

The Shabak

The Shabak have received far less attention from either researchers or journalists than the Yezidis. Historically, they were sharecroppers concentrated in a number of villages along the Mosul-Eski Kalak road. Apart from their local community leaders, the Shabak traditionally also knew urban landlords or *sâda* (plural of *sayyid*) in nearby Mosul, who themselves belonged to affluent orthodox Twelver Shi'ite families. Whenever rural Shabak had business in Mosul, they would come to stay at their sayyid's house, paying them all due respects.⁶

The Shabak are—or were—heterodox Shi'ites or *Ghulât*. Theologically, their faith is close to that of the heterodox Shi'ite Alevis in Central and Eastern Anatolia, part of whom speak Zaza or Kurmanji Kurdish. Linguistically, their vernacular, called “Shabakî,” has similarities with Zaza as well, although it is rather closer to what is called “Gorani” in the academic literature: it shares many grammatical features with the Macho spoken by Kaka'îs in Kirkuk region and the Hawrami spoken in the Shahrizor area on the Iraq-Iran border. These theological and linguistic affinities have not been satisfactorily explained. Most probably, the Shabak descend from Qizilbash troops associated with Shah Isma'îl in the sixteenth-century confrontation between the Ottomans and the emerging Safawî empire in Eastern Anatolia. In later centuries, however, when Ottoman rule had stabilized, these particular troops appear to have settled and lost whatever military prowess or fighting reputation they might have had before. In the late Ottoman Empire and in monarchical Iraq, they had a reputation for being unfit for any kind of military activity (Vinogradov 1974). This reputation, however, may also be due to other factors, like a resistance to Ottoman, and later Iraqi, attempts at conscription, and conversion.⁷ Much later, in republican Iraq, increasing numbers of Shabak joined the national army, belying this non-military reputation.

As a religious community, the Shabak made barely more use of scripture than the Yezidis. True enough, they had a sacred book of their own, the *Buyruq*

6 See in particular Vinogradov (1974: 207–18). In a later paper (Rassam 1977: 157–66), the same author specifically describes the relation between rural Shabak and urban *sâda* as one of patronage.

7 Thus, Deringil (1999: 71–73) describes some of the attempts at assimilation and/or conversion by the reforming nineteenth-century Ottoman state: in 1892, Ottoman general Ömer Vehbi Pasha invited a number of Yezidi and Shabak leaders for some official celebration in Mosul, but subsequently humiliated these guests by forcing them to convert to Sunni Islam and swear loyalty to the Ottoman sultan in public.

or *Kitâb al-manâqib*, reproduced by al-Sarraf (1954), which appears to be genuine. This book, however, is written in Turkish, a language only a limited number of Shabak command, and hence seems to have played a role in only a limited number of Shabak rituals. There are also a number of other texts written by Shabak religious specialists, like an Arabic-language refutation of the Yezidi faith and a *mawlûd*, or biography of the prophet, written in the Shabakî vernacular, but these do not appear to have had a wide circulation or frequent use either (Dehqan 2008; Kakeî 2014).

Each Shabak adult had a *pîr* or *dede* for a spiritual guide, who would lead them functionaries (*on iki hizmet*); the highest religious authority was known as the *baba* (al-Sarraf 1954: 101–03; Van Bruinessen 2000: 300). The Shabak made regular visits, or pilgrimages, to local shrines, notably those of Ali Resh and Abbas; but al-Sarraf notes that already by the 1950s, Shabak were increasingly making pilgrimages to the Twelver Shi'ite shrines in the holy cities of Southern Iraq, Kerbela, and Najaf. Vinogradov (1974), basing herself on fieldwork in the republican period (al-Sarraf 1954: 101–03), likewise observes that increasing numbers of Shabak were converting to Twelver Shi'ism. But perhaps this was not simply a matter of eroding religious authority among a minority. With increasing literacy and upward social mobility, the Shabak's traditional religious leaders appear to have lost social power. This secularization, however, was not specific to the Shabak; after the 1958 revolution, the rapidly evolving Iraqi state offered increasing access to schooling and new employment opportunities, in particular through the military and the rapidly expanding bureaucracy.

It is not entirely clear to what extent the *sâda* can be called religious leaders rather than political patrons or social middlemen. As noted, they were themselves orthodox Twelver Shi'ites rather than heterodox *ghulât*, but I have not seen any reports of *sâda* attempting to convert any of their Shabak clients to orthodox Twelver Shi'ism. I did come across another, quite intriguing, case of conversion during my fieldwork in the early 1990s. This concerns the so-called Sarlû or Sarlî, a community living in a number of villages near Eski Kalak just east of the Shabak-inhabited region. During a visit to the nearby mujamma'a—or relocation camp—where they had been resettled by the Ba'athist regime, these Sarlî turned out to be not a distinct community, but Ibrahimî Kaka'îs whose sayyid lived in nearby Erbil. Moreover, when I asked whether there were any Shabak living in the area, my Sarlî hosts said that they were Shabak themselves. Their ancestors had in recent times converted to the Kaka'î faith, apparently due primarily to the personal charisma of, or patronage offered by, Kaka'î leader Fattah Agha (Leezenberg 1997; Edmonds 1957: 188–89). Whatever the details of this conversion, it suggests that the Shabak's religious affiliation, or patronage, was already unstable or dynamic in late monarchical and early

republican times, and susceptible to pressures not only from Twelver Shi'ism but also from other heterodox religions.

Perhaps, however, one should not overstate such claims that Shabak loyalties to these leaders may have shifted towards the Twelver Shi'ite 'ulamâ: during this period, the orthodox Shi'ite religious leadership itself faced a severe lack of followers, reflecting a widespread secularization, or loss of interest in religious matters, let alone the development of politicized and revolutionary forms of religion, among the Iraqis coming of age in these years. During the 1950s and 1960s, when communists and Arab and Kurdish nationalists could easily mobilize tens of thousands of people, the major centers of Shi'ite learning in Najaf and Kerbela attracted barely a few dozens of pupils (Nakash 1994: 254). Quite generally, in this period, loyalties and identities tended to be articulated in secular nationalist and/or ethnic terms, and/or in Marxist anti-imperialist vocabulary, rather than in religious categories, to some extent—with the exception of the Da'wa party, which mobilized among Shi'ites in Southern Iraq. Hence, between the 1960s and 1980s, the main question concerning the Shabak between the Arab-nationalist Ba'ath regime and the Kurdish national movement was whether they were “really” Kurds or Arabs, not whether they were “really” Sunnis or Shi'ites.⁸ Likewise, when I did my first field research among the Shabak during the early 1990s, my informants never spontaneously mentioned their religion, and were generally reluctant to talk about religious matters.

Although generally loyal to the state, Shabak resisted Arab-nationalist claims that they were really Arabs rather than Kurds. During the 1970s, the political loyalties of the Shabak and their leaders were ambivalent, or divided, between the Iraqi state and the Kurdish movement. Indeed, it was the confrontation between two secular nationalisms that was to have the most dramatic and destructive consequences for the Shabak in Ba'athist times: in 1988, the Iraqi regime had large numbers of Shabak deported from their villages, and had their houses demolished. I return to this below.

Religiously, the Shabak's trajectory has been quite distinct both from that of the Yezidis in Iraq and from that of the Alevis in Turkey, the group theologically

8 Likewise, an Ibrahimî Kaka'î sayyid (interview, Erbil, November 1992) once told me how, during the 1970s, the Ba'athist government tried to disassociate the Kaka'îs from the Kurdish movement among others with the theological argument that their leaders, being the descendants of the Twelver Shi'ite imams, were Arabs rather than Kurds. Pro-Kurdish Kaka'î leaders then had their *kalamkhwan*, or religious specialists, reply that the Kaka'î leaders were reincarnations rather than linear descendants of the imams, and as such were ethnically Kurdish. In this case, as with the Yezidis, secular nationalists were not adverse to theological argumentation if it suited their cause.

perhaps closest to them. Martin van Bruinessen (2000) has argued that labor migration, urbanization, and an increase in literacy and access to education among Alevis in Turkey and Western European diaspora have led to what he calls a *scripturalization* of the Alevi faith, in which written sources of religious knowledges were no longer surrounded by secrecy, and became publicly accessible through printing. As a result, the use of written sources gradually replaced the personally and orally transmitted religious knowledge of the religion of their ancestors, and thus undermined the reproduction of the religious authority of traditional specialists. Young, urban Alevis generally had a better education than their parents, their pîrs, and their dedes, and tended to look for answers to their religious questions in written sources—and, increasingly, on the internet—rather than among rural elderly and religious leaders, whom they considered backward. Although the Shabak in Iraq, as noted, have similar historical and theological roots as the Alevis, and have witnessed similar processes of urbanization, education, and upward social mobility, these processes appear to have had rather different results for them. Among the Shabak, it seems, the loss in prestige and authority of both religious authorities like pîrs and dedes and more worldly patrons like the urban sâda did not lead to a more scripturalist redefinition of the variety of the heterodox Shi'ite or *ghulât* faith specific to the Shabak. Rather, it led to a substantial conversion to orthodox Twelver Shi'ism, and to a lesser extent—and in a more locally restricted manner—to the Kaka'î faith. The experience of the Sarlî mentioned above suggests that absorption or assimilation into the Kaka'î community was relatively easy for Shabak; conversion to Twelver Shi'ism, it appears, was hardly more difficult or problematic.

Assyrian Christians

I will conclude this historical overview with a brief sketch of the Assyrian Christians in Northern Iraq, in particular those living in the Ninewa plain. "Assyrians" is a catch-all term for Christians presently or formerly speaking a variety of (Eastern) Neo-Aramaic, and belonging to one of the Eastern churches that (formerly) used classical Syriac as their liturgical language. The Christians in Ninewa plain, unlike those in Badinan, Erbil, and Shaqlawa, have undergone a significant language shift towards Arabic.

Historically, the Assyrian Christians have been divided by religion as much as they were unified by language. In fact, the very label "Assyrian," a secular-nationalist invention of modern times, is actually resented by the members

and leaders of various denominations (Joseph 2000: 221).⁹ In Northern Iraq, the most important religious denominations or subgroups are, first, the Assyrian Church of the East, associated with Nestorian Christianity. For a long time, the patriarchs of this church had their see in Alqosh, some fifty kilometers north of Mosul. There are also substantial numbers of Nestorians further north, the descendants of the numerous refugees from the Hakkari mountains who had fled the massacres of Christians during World War I. Eventually, these refugees had been resettled by the British mandate authorities in Iraq in the cities of Zakho and Duhok, and in villages in the nearby Badinan region. Over the centuries, the Nestorian church saw repeated schisms, partly originating in conflicts about succession to the patriarchate. The most important part of the Church that broke away associated itself with Roman Catholic Christianity. This branch would come to be known as the “Chaldaeian Catholic Church;” its followers are usually called, and usually call themselves, *Kaldânî*. At present, Alqosh is the main religious center of this Chaldaeian Catholic Church. There is also a smaller community associated with the Syrian Orthodox Church, which is at times referred to as “Jacobite.” At present, the Northern Iraq branch of this church is led by Archbishop Mor Nicodimus Dawood Sharaf, the metropolitan of Mosul and environs. There was also a metropolitan living in Bartalla; both leaders apparently resettled in Erbil after August 2014.

Thus, Assyrian religious leadership, in particular that of the Church of the East, has historically been relatively unstable and easy to challenge. One may also surmise that these numerous splits and schisms are one of the factors that prevented a strong and unified Assyrian national movement from emerging.¹⁰ These schisms continued well into the twentieth century, with a new “Ancient Church of the East” being established in the 1960s.

It was also during the 1960s that the Assyrian Christians became caught between competing secular Arab and Kurdish nationalisms. The Kurdish insurgents tried to mobilize Assyrian Christians for the armed uprising that had

9 See for comparison, Hunter (2014: 331). These controversies are, in fact, reflected in the very title of one of the major studies of this people. In 1961, John Joseph published a study *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors*, which dealt with the arrival of Western missionaries and the various consequences for local Christians in the area straddling present-day Southeastern Turkey, Northern Iraq, and Northwestern Iran. In 2000, a revised edition of this study was published under the title *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East*. In the preface to this edition, the author notes that the term “Assyrians” is still controversial, and that many readers of the first edition did not realize that the “Nestorians” discussed there were the same people as the “Assyrians” mentioned elsewhere (vii).

10 For an overview of the origins of modern Assyrian nationalism, see Becker (2015).

broken out in 1961, occasionally referring to them as “Kurdish Christians.” The Ba’ath regime that came to power in 1963 pursued an increasingly aggressive Arab-nationalist line, denying the very existence of the Assyrians, whom they preferred to call “Arab Christians,” and from the 1970s on, they started pursuing various assimilationist policies, like curtailing or outlawing the use of Assyrian. In reaction, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) was formed in 1979. This was a political movement that was militantly anti-Ba’athist and secular, and bypassed the religious authorities in its very attempt to mobilize along modern secular national lines. Obviously, the Assyrian religious leadership of the various denominations was in no position to take a similarly defiant stance. Nonetheless, during the Iran-Iraq war, the Catholicos-Patriarch and other leaders of the Church of the East felt constrained to flee abroad and re-establish the patriarchal see in Chicago in the United States. This loss of societal influence is due not only to political pressures and armed conflict, it also reflects the generally secularizing tendencies in Iraq during these decades.

One particular challenge to the Assyrian Christian leadership is the significant number of conversions to evangelical Christianity. Already from the eighteenth century, the Christians—and to a lesser extent also the Yezidis—in Ninewa plain, Sheykhān, and Amadiya had been targeted by missionary efforts, at first by Catholic missionaries, and in the nineteenth century increasingly by Evangelical Protestants (Leezenberg 2018). It is unclear how many Assyrians are at present associated with an evangelical church, and how their presence has affected traditional religious authority; but its effect seems to have been as erosive as that of the country’s broader secularizing developments.

The literacy rate among Assyrian Christians of different denominations appears to be, and to have been, significantly higher than among either the Yezidis or the Shabak. This may be due in part to their having had a lengthier and more intensive exposure to Western Catholic and evangelical missionary efforts, and to various socioeconomic factors.

Despite the dominance of the ADM, Assyrians appear to have remained divided by denominational differences. In fact, the diverging linguistic ideologies of the different churches even prevented the creation of a unified language for modern elementary and higher education; apparently, such a more or less unified language was achieved only in 1993.¹¹

11 One Assyrian informant told me that there were still differences in vocabulary and orthography between the different Assyrian sects, and even between different genres practiced by a single person; but a detailed discussion of these complex linguistic practices and ideologies would take us too far afield here (interview, Erbil, May 2017).

Below, I focus on the Christians living in the Ninewa plain, which became an IS target in the summer of 2014, but had been subject to salafi-jihadî assaults already on several occasions in the preceding years.

The Anfal and Post-Saddam Iraq

In different ways and to different extents, the Yezidis, Christians, and Shabak have all been exposed to the violently nationalist and assimilationist policies of the Iraqi regime, and in particular to its increasingly destructive and murderous suppression of the Kurdish insurgency in the 1980s. The culmination of this process was undoubtedly the genocidal 1988 Anfal operations conducted by the regime, in which an estimated 100,000 Iraqi civilians perished (Human Rights Watch 1995). These operations had been orchestrated through the 1987 census, in which the regime gave citizens no option other than to register as either Arabs or Kurds, posing acute problems of loyalty for minorities like the Yezidis, the Shabak, and the Christians.

According to Human Rights Watch, the areas outside of government control, where no census could be held, automatically became targets of the Anfal. Alongside Kurds proper, the Yezidis and Assyrians living in villages outside Iraqi government control were targeted in these operations. After initial airborne attacks with chemical weapons had chased the villagers out of their dwellings, they would be rounded up, divided into age groups, and deported—or, in the case of the younger men, summarily executed. Their villages would then be destroyed.¹²

The overflow of these operations also hit the Shabak, who lived in an area under full government control, and who had generally been loyal to the Iraqi regime, or at least tried to remain neutral regarding the confrontation between government and Kurdish movement. In the 1987 census, the Iraqi regime had declared them beforehand to be Arabs rather than Kurds. When a number of Shabak leaders subsequently protested that they considered themselves to be Kurds, the Ba'ath party's Northern Bureau Director, 'Ali Hasan al-Majîd, ordered their villages to be destroyed and their inhabitants to be resettled elsewhere in Northern Iraq, mostly on the Desht Harîr plain north of Erbil.¹³ Although the Ba'athist regime did not see these harsh measures as part of the

12 See Human Rights Watch (1995), in particular chapter ten, dealing with the "final Anfal" in Badinan region.

13 For a photographic reproduction and a translation of the deportation order, see Human Rights Watch (1994: 28–29); see also Leezenberg (1997).

Anfal operations proper, and only carried them out after the end of the final Anfal, these deportations appear to follow the same destructive logic that characterized the operations and, more generally, late-1980s Ba'athist policies in Northern Iraq.

The establishment of a region under *de facto* Kurdish control in 1991 announced an entirely new era for the Kurds in Iraq. However, most of the areas inhabited by the minorities described above, in particular Ninewa plain and Mount Sinjar, remained outside the *de facto* autonomous Kurdish zone that was established in 1991. The Assyrians were the sole ethnic group to be represented politically as such in the Kurdistan Region: unlike sectarian groups like the Yezidis, the Shabak, or the Kaka'îs, and unlike linguistically defined ethnic groups like the Turcomans, the Assyrians have had five reserved seats in the 105-seat regional parliament from the 1992 elections onwards. Four of these five seats have since 1992 been occupied by representatives of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM); the remaining seat fell to the Kurdistan Christian Union, a party affiliated with the KDP. Unlike elsewhere in Iraq, Christian missionaries have been allowed, if not encouraged, to proselytize in the Kurdistan Region after 2003, and in fact already from 1991 on (Christian Aid Mission 2015). Although these missionaries focused their efforts on Assyrian Christians and, to a lesser extent, Yezidis in the region, smaller numbers of Muslims (both of Sunni and Shi'ite background) have also converted.¹⁴ It is difficult at present to assess the effect of these missionary efforts on the traditional Christian leadership.

This constellation in Northern Iraq was not dramatically changed by the 2003 war, but the ensuing instability in other parts of postwar Iraq, and in particular the sectarian violence that erupted in 2005–2006, led to a massive exodus of Christians from their traditional dwellings, involving up to half of the country's Christian population, estimated at some 900,000 at the start of the war (Hunter 2014: 324). An unknown number of Christians fled to the Kurdistan region, which remained largely immune to the sectarian violence, and boasted—with considerable justification—of its tolerant policies towards religious minorities. Already in 2005, the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Dinkha IV, had met with regional president Barzani, to discuss the possibility of returning to Kurdistan and of establishing a patriarchal residence in Ain Kawa, but for some reason these plans did not come to fruition (Hunter 2014: 326).¹⁵

14 Personal observations and interviews, evangelical congregation, Ain Kawa, July 2010.

15 There is a surprising lack of scholarly studies on the recent political and social history of the Assyrians in (Northern) Iraq; for some preliminary discussion, see Hunter (2014).

For Iraq as a whole, the 1990s had been a period of incubation following the collapse of the communist Eastern Bloc in 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, and preceding the eruption of openly sectarian politics after 2003. During this period, Marxism-Leninism had quickly disappeared as a vocabulary for anti-imperialist or anti-Western sentiment and mobilization—though not necessarily as a model for party organization—and would eventually be replaced by a moralized and increasingly sectarian religious discourse. It was not until the next decade and after the ousting of the Ba’athist regime, however, that this newly politicized sectarian discourse would be translated into actual political mobilization or violent action. The Kurdistan region was distinct in that, between 1991 and 2003, it witnessed the rise and subsequent demise of politicized, and in part militant, (Sunni) Islam and its subsequent incorporation into the civilian parliamentary system (Leezenberg 2017). Thus, unlike the rest of Iraq, the Kurdistan Region did not as such become the theater of postwar chaos and instability, let alone violent sectarian conflict. However, in the frontier zones between the Arab-dominated regions under central government control and Kurdish-held territory, the seeds for new troubles were sown.¹⁶ In 2003, Kurdish Peshmerga had established *de facto* military control over part of Kirkuk province, as well as in Sinjar and on the Ninewa plain, even though these regions remained under *de jure* control by, respectively, the national government and the governorate of Mosul. Although the Kurdish leadership emphasized the Kurdishness of these population groups and claimed they should be attached to the Kurdistan region, the population of all these regions, as noted, was in fact mixed and heterogeneous; the groups living on Ninewa plain, in particular, could not unambiguously be called either Kurds or Arabs. KRG sources claimed that Yezidis and Shabak were “really” Kurds, and that the different minorities living in these areas were safer under Kurdish rule than as part of the Sunni Arab-dominated Mosul governorate in which violent salafī-jihadī insurgent groups were on the rise, increasingly targeting members of all these minorities.

It proved impossible to reach a negotiated solution, not so much between the different population groups as between the authorities in Erbil and those in Mosul. The 2005 constitution called for these conflicts to be settled by referenda among the local population, but no such referendum was held in any of the disputed areas. Instead, the conflicting parties increasingly tried to co-opt

16 For an assessment of developments up to mid-2009, prior to the departure of American troops and prior to the outbreak of new forms of sectarian violence that would culminate in the summer 2014 IS offensive, see International Crisis Group (2009), Human Rights Watch (2009); see also Leezenberg (2014).

or coerce these groups into siding with them; as a result, violence against these groups increased considerably in these years. Especially in the city of Mosul and its vicinity, robberies, kidnappings, and even assassinations of minority members became more and more frequent. A 2010 Amnesty International report warned that the region's minorities were "increasingly becoming pawns in a power struggle between an Arab-dominated central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government" (quoted in Hunter 2014: 331).

The new—or renewed—confrontation between the secular nationalist Kurdish leaders and the Arab-dominated, and increasingly sectarian Shi'ite central government in Baghdad led to new pressures on, and ruptures within, the communities under discussion. All three groups faced the choice of either casting their lot with the KRG or siding with the Baghdad government or with Shi'ite parties.

Hence, after the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, another, more clearly religious, dynamic developed among the Shabak, who now no longer faced questions of whether they were Arab or Kurds (let alone Turcomans), but rather whether they were Sunni or Shi'ites. It was during this time that the slogan "the Shabak are 65 percent Shi'ite, and 35 percent Sunni" became more widespread.¹⁷ Clearly, this shift reflects the rising sectarianism in national politics, in which a new and increasingly violent confrontation between Sunnis and Shi'ites developed, but it also reflected the new options for patronage relations on a national scale. This new national setting appears to have caused new rifts in the Shabak community. Some Shabak believed that they were best off with Kurdish protection, and accepted KDP patronage; others resented the latter's assimilationist claim that the Shabak were Kurds, and preferred to side with Shi'ite parties. Yet others believed that the Shabak, together with the other minorities in the Ninewa plain, should demand a distinct cantonized or autonomous status for the region; but they were unable to form a single front—or to resist the pressures and temptations of stronger regional patrons.

In the process, whatever distinct religious authority the Shabak had known seems to have evaporated. One Shabak informant claimed that, during his last visit to Mosul in 2011, he was told that the traditional *sāda* had completely disappeared; the widow of a religious specialist—who, significantly, had died without any successor taking his place—had complained to him that more and more Shabak were leaving their "babas," as he called them, for Twelver Shi'ite clerics in Southern Iraq.¹⁸ Although I have no concrete data on the matter, there are indications that the Shabak religious specialists like the *pîrs*,

17 Interviews, Duhok, July 2010; Brussels, July 2015.

18 Interview, anonymous Shabak informant, Amsterdam area, December 2016.

dedes, and their supreme leader, the baba, have likewise moved out of the region, or died without appointing successors. Instead, the religious leadership of the Shabak appears to be in the process of being transferred to orthodox Twelver Shi'ite 'ulamâ in southern Iraq. Already by the 1980s, it appears, the traditional sâda had largely disappeared as urban patrons; and by the early twenty-first century, there were few if any of the traditional religious leaders left. This religious reorientation has been paired to a number of significant political realignments: various Shabak who are wary of Kurdish intentions have thrown in their lot with Shi'ite political parties in Baghdad rather than the KDP; the most well-known of these is Shabak leader Hunayn Qaddo, who is associated with al-Malikî's Shi'ite-leaning Da'wa in the Iraqi parliament. This political affinity was increasingly reflected in Shabak religious self-definitions. One Shabak spokesman went so far as to explicitly deny there were any doctrinal differences between the Shabakî faith and orthodox Twelver Shi'ism, claiming that the former was only an old-fashioned and outdated form of the latter. Likewise, a Shabak formerly living in Mosul city but who fled to Erbil ahead of the IS offensive denied the existence of a baba, and asserted that the sole religious Shabak leader was Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf.¹⁹

Thus, the Shabak increasingly turned to new patrons in a newly developed national and transnational political arena. As a result, the steadily rising Iranian influence in the region, both among Kurdish rulers and among the Shi'ite parties, became almost impossible to ignore especially by heterodox or orthodox Twelver Shi'ite communities. It seems to have been Iranian backing that encouraged the Shabak to open new Husainiyas in their hometowns, and to publicly sport flags of Shi'ite Imam 'Ali.²⁰ Some Assyrian Christians even claimed that Shabak, backed by Iran, had seized land belonging to Assyrian villages in Ninewa plain, a claim denied by Shabak leaders.²¹ Whatever the truth of the matter, this claim points to one of the less frequently noted underlying causes of local conflict: land disputes. Already in the early 1990s, one could hear various stories, by Assyrians in particular, about land grabs by local Kurdish strongmen with party affiliations in the Badinan region. In 1994, these land conflicts led to the assassination of regional ADM parliament member Frances Yousef Shabo, and several other Assyrians.²²

19 Interview, Shabak spokesman, Brussels, Belgium, July 2015; interview Shabak refugee, Erbil, May 2017.

20 Personal observations, interviews, Duhok, July 2010.

21 Interview, Assyrian representatives, Brussels, Belgium, July 2015.

22 Interviews, senior ADM figures, Duhok, Erbil, August 1994.

Despite the official Kurdish rhetoric, the KRG—and more specifically, the KDP—which until the IS offensive had an uncontested military dominance in the region, was accused of treating all these minority groups as second-class citizens, and of giving away all important posts in local government to party veterans. Clearly, the local population groups were less than fully happy with Kurdish rule; repeated demonstrations against KDP behavior in the region occurred, several of them ending with Kurdish security forces opening fire against civilians (Leezenberg 2014).

The 2014 IS Offensive and its Implications

In August 2014, following the dramatic capture of Mosul in June, warriors of the so-called “Islamic State” launched a lightning offensive against the Kurdistan region, and more specifically against the disputed territories the Kurds had occupied in 2003.²³ After capturing Sinjar and virtually all of the Ninewa plain east of Mosul, they advanced on Erbil and Kirkuk, but were subsequently brought to a halt by Kurdish forces supported by US air power. Although the offensive has generally been represented as an onslaught against the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and against the Iraqi Kurds, it specifically targeted the three minority groups described above. None of these groups could unambiguously be said to be Kurdish, and all of them had repeatedly had problems or confrontations with the Kurdistan Regional Government and its local representatives. In attacking these particular regions, it almost seems as if IS was testing the KRG’s resolve to protect the non-Kurdish, or not strictly Kurdish, population groups under its control.

The KRG failed miserably to protect these areas and the population groups living in them. Nowhere did this become more clearly, and more painfully, visible than in the fate of the Sinjarî Yezidis. The IS onslaught against this group was particularly murderous, and indeed unambiguously genocidal. Having been left to their own devices by local Kurdish forces, many Yezidi civilians fled up Mount Sinjar, exposed to the scorching August sun until relief came in the form of helicopter supplies, and of PKK guerrillas establishing a corridor providing safe passage to northeast Syria. Those Sinjarî Yezidis who were unable to escape were rounded up by IS troops according to age and gender; the Yezidi

23 The movement initially called itself “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” (*al-dawla al-islamiyya fi’l-‘Irâq wa’l-shâm*, acronym *DAESH*), but subsequently reduced this to “Islamic State” (IS, *al-dawla al-islamiyya*). Despite this name, it never sought recognition as a state in any international forum.

men were summarily executed, and the younger women were abducted to be sold as slaves in IS strongholds like Mosul and Raqqa. Although unprecedented among Islamic or Islamist groups in the region, these particular tactics had an eerie resemblance to the policies pursued by the secular Ba'athist regime during the 1988 Anfal operations described earlier.

Yezidi sources claim that the local Yezidi population had first been disarmed by KRG forces on the pretext that their weapons were needed in the fight against IS, and that the Kurdish forces that were supposed to protect them left even before the arrival of IS warriors.²⁴ KRG sources, by contrast, said that local Peshmerga commanders frantically called for reinforcements, but when these failed to arrive, they were left with no other option than to withdraw.²⁵ Whatever the reasons for the Peshmerga withdrawal, its consequences have been widely publicized. In particular, the enslavement of Yezidi women and girls for the sexual gratification of IS horrified Western public opinion, as its brazen display on social media was undoubtedly intended to do. Also on a local level, IS's instrumentalization of sexuality as a weapon of war was clearly facilitated by the knowledge of how important women were to Yezidi collective self-esteem and group identity.

Even after the offensive and the ensuing refugee crisis, the politicization of the minorities' plight continued. Most Yezidi internally displaced persons (IDPs) were resettled in camps near Duhok, or across the border in Southeastern Turkey, with UNICEF representatives openly stating their expectation that the entire Yezidi community would disappear from Iraq within twenty years. The KRG showed its displeasure with some Yezidis siding with the PKK by imposing an embargo on Sinjar in November 2016, and, in early in January 2017, closed down the offices of Yazda, one of the main NGOs providing humanitarian relief to the Shingalî population (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Camp inhabitants, in particular the Christians, were generally unwilling to speak openly about the political dimensions of what had happened; but one had the distinct impression that many of them felt let down, if not betrayed, by the Kurdish authorities who had so singularly failed to protect them.²⁶

The IS assault put Yezidi worldly leader Mîr Tahsîn Beg in a delicate position. Ever since 2003, he had unambiguously sided with Barzani and the Kurdistan Regional Government, but he now faced a widespread sense of disillusionment

24 Yezidi spokesman from Sinjar, Brussels, July 2015.

25 For a detailed account that is highly critical of the KRG (and clearly pro-PKK), see Demir (2015).

26 Personal observations and interviews, Baharka and Hershém refugee camps and refugee settlements in Ain Kawa suburb, November 2014 and August 2015.

among his community of having been let down if not betrayed by the Iraqi Kurdish authorities. Despite the increasing sympathy for the PKK, however, he subsequently reasserted the leading role of the KRG, and in particular of regional president Barzani, saying that the latter was “the true leader” of the Yezidis, and rejecting PKK-led attempts to create a “canton” of Shingal on the model of the Kurdish-held cantons in Rojava or Northeastern Syria (Kurdistan TV 2015).²⁷

IS actions towards Christians and Shabak have been rather less visible, and less dramatic, than those against the Yezidis, but hardly less destructive. Christians and other minorities living in the Ninewa area were barely able to flee ahead of the lightning offensive, during which IS troops captured many Christian and Shabak villages in Hamdaniya district southeast of Mosul. Larger towns like Qaraqosh, Bartallah, and Bakhdida were also overrun; their entire Christian and other non-Sunni populations fled. IS troops also came close to conquering Alqosh, but were successfully pushed back by both Assyrian militias and Kurdish Peshmerga. In the spring of 2017, these towns would be reconquered by the Peshmerga as part of the joint Mosul offensive; but even after the ousting of IS, only part of the population returned.

Unlike in Sinjar, the civilian population in Ninewa plain was generally able to escape in time, and to seek refuge elsewhere, in particular in the regional capital Erbil. Many Christians, mostly from Hamdaniya district, were initially sheltered in prefab houses constructed inside an abandoned shopping mall in Ain Kawa. They were relatively well-off, being sheltered from the rain and cold of winter, and subsequently resettled in proper housing nearby. Far more chaotic, and far less hygienic, were circumstances in nearby camps like Hershesh on the outskirts of Ain Kawa, and Baharka, the largest camp in the region, a few miles outside Erbil. Here, IDPs were housed in tents with little heating for the winter and—initially at least—no cooling during summer, with insufficient access to clean water and medical care. Hershesh harbored relatively many Shi’ite or Shi’ite-leaning IDPs, including Shabak and Turcomans; Baharka sheltered IDPs from various backgrounds, including Baghdadî Shi’ites as well as Sunni Palestinians ousted by Shi’ite militias. Christians were seemingly better cared for than these other groups; but a good many of them were skeptical of the possibilities of returning to their homes even if IS were to be ousted,

27 For an earlier interview, held just prior to the 2014 offensive, see Religions- und Kulturzeitung Lalis (2013). In this interview, the Yezidi leader states that Yezidis are indeed Kurds, but deserve (and have received) a distinct status in the Iraqi constitution; he also emphasizes the need for education, as long as it respects Yezidi traditions.

some of them saying that KDP members were buying the occupied lands on the cheap after their reconquest.²⁸

It is as yet unclear how the offensive has affected the religious leaders of the Christians in the region; most dramatically, however, it has led to the return of the Nestorian patriarch. After the ousting of Saddam's regime, there had been earlier plans to move the patriarchal see back to Mesopotamia, but these had not materialized. In 2015, however, the Nestorian patriarchate returned to Iraq, as the leaders of the Church of the East felt that their presence was more urgently needed there than in North America. After the death of Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Dinkha I in the United States in March 2015, the new patriarch, Gewargis, was formally consecrated in Erbil in September of the same year.

The post-2014 fate of the Shabak IDPs leaves little room for optimism. After initially being harbored in camps near Erbil, the KRG subsequently allowed—or, according to some sources, actively encouraged—Shabak IDPs to leave Northern Iraq and to resettle in the Shi'ite South of the country; an unknown number of Shabak remained in the South at the time of writing, either in refugee camps or in more permanent housing.²⁹ Given the dispersal of Shabak refugees, and given the longer-term trends described above, there is at present a serious risk of the Shabak disappearing altogether as a distinct community. Not only is there substantial pressure towards assimilation into the larger Kurdish and Shi'ite communities—without necessarily being fully accepted by either—but the apparent disappearance of a specifically Shabakī religious leadership will only accelerate existing tendencies. Thus, external pressures to assimilate are strengthened by internal divisions, primarily concerning which actor to choose as a patron in the Iraqi national arena.

One final consequence of the 2014 offensive is that it led to a significant, if still largely symbolic, number of conversions by Kurds in the Sulaimaniya area—not to Yezidism, which had long been seen as a specifically Kurdish faith, but is not a proselytizing religion—but to Zoroastrianism, which many nationalist Kurds see as their people's original religion. There are no indications, however, that this local Zoroastrian movement is linked in any way to existing Zoroastrian communities or leaders in India, Iran, or elsewhere, and this claimed conversion may well turn out to be an ephemeral phenomenon.³⁰ There are no signs either that minorities like the Yezidis, the Shabak, or the Kaka'is are involved in this particular shift towards Zoroastrianism.

28 Interviews, Erbil, Ain Kawa, August 2015 and May 2017.

29 Interviews, Erbil, Baharke, and Hershém refugee camps, November 2014 and August 2015.

30 For an interview with the self-proclaimed leader of these new Zoroastrians, pîr Luqman Hajj, see Salloum (2016).

Conclusions

The religious leadership of all three groups under consideration has been deeply but rather differently affected, if not transformed, by socioeconomic developments such as urbanization, upward social mobility (primarily through the army), and education; by the rise and demise of the assimilationist Arab-nationalist Ba'athist state; and by the emergence of an autonomous Kurdistan Region in Northern Iraq. Over the decades, the Yezidi religious leadership appears to have braved the secularizing tendencies of urbanization—whether voluntary or forced—, social mobility, and increased education, and to have retained or rearticulated its position. The authority of the various Assyrian Christian leaders, already fragmented, was exposed to similarly erosive forces, and further constrained both by the secular ADM and by evangelical proselytizing. The religious leadership of the Shabak, finally, appears to have dissolved altogether, putting this community's continued existence as a distinct group at risk.

The 2014 IS offensive and its aftermath have posed the gravest challenge for all three groups and their leaders since the 1980s. It is too early to assess the consequences of this offensive for the status of the leaders of these communities—and indeed, for the very survival of these groups in the region—but clearly, these have been forced to seek new ways of protecting them against such dangers beyond seeking support from the Kurdish authorities who had failed to protect them in the first place.³¹

Increasingly, religious and political leaders of all three groups are also traveling to Europe and the US to seek stronger commitments from the international community; but, thus far, these visits have been of mostly symbolic importance, and have yielded few concrete results. Thus, in January 2015, both the worldly and the religious leader of the Yezidis, Mîr Tahsîn Beg and Baba Shaykh Mato, met with Pope Francis in Rome. Apart from generating much airplay, however, this visit did not lead to any concrete pledges. Secular Shabak leader Hunayn Qaddo regularly visits Europe to meet with community members and European politicians. Nowadays, there is also a permanent Shabak representative in Europe as well, but he is affiliated with Qaddo's political movement rather than with the Shabak religious establishment.

31 Following the September 2017 referendum on independence in the Kurdistan Region, the Iraqi army reconquered all disputed areas. It is too early to make any balanced statement on how this new, rather unexpected twist to the region's history will affect the minorities (formerly) living there.

In the spring of 2017, Mosul, the last remaining IS stronghold in Iraq, fell into government hands again; but none of the underlying conflicts, in particular those regarding the disputed territories and their populations, came any nearer a solution. If anything, the behavior of the “international community”—or rather, of the Western countries involved in the anti-IS alliance—suggests a form of *Realpolitik*, to which the interests of the regions’ smaller groups may well be sacrificed. Thus, the KRG seemed to act as if its participation in the Mosul offensive entitled it to attach the regions of Kirkuk, and Sinjar and the Ninewa plain to the Kurdistan Region, in disregard both of constitutional provisions and of possible wishes of the local population (Rudaw 2016).³² Among these wishes was the plan for an autonomous region, a “safe haven” or an “enclave” in the Ninewa plain, which is beholden neither to the central government nor to the Kurdish-nationalist KRG. However, the Christians, Shabak, and Yezidis living in the area seem to be too divided politically between each other and among themselves—and as a result too dependent on external patrons like Kurdish and Shi’ite parties—to raise an effective and unified protest against the facts created on the ground by the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and Iraqi government troops, and by international political bargaining. If this trend continues, the leadership of these communities risks becoming a purely symbolic function, masking or reflecting its almost complete subordination, marginalization, and clientelization by the authorities of the Kurdistan Region.

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32 This *de facto* annexation of the disputed territories was annulled in the wake of the September 2017 referendum on Kurdish independence and the subsequent reconquest of all disputed areas, including Ninewa plain, by troops loyal to the Iraqi government. Unfortunately, a discussion of this dramatic reversal—let alone its consequences and implications for the local population and their leadership—could not be included in the present paper.

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