Sectarianism in Kurdistan Region of Iraq Between Political and Theological Schism

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ABSTRACT

Sectarianism has become the magic word with which many scholars and politicians describe the current Middle East politics. Much of the existing literature presumes that most of the state and non-state actors of the region are divided over Shia and Sunni blocs led by Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabi (KSA) respectively. However, so far scholars have left out the Kurds within their studies on sectarianism. Scholars have not explicitly pointed out why they are disinterested in sectarianism among the Kurds; it might be due to the perception that the Kurds are mostly Sunnis who have an ethnic and not a religious cause. The main aim of this research is to look at sectarianism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and find out whether or not of this perception is true. To do so, this research rejects the general application of the English term "sectarianism" in the first place as a theme to explain the politics of the Middle East. Instead, in the first chapter it is argued that there are three tiers of relations among regional actors: 1) state-state realpolitik, which is based on geopolitical realities among Turkey, Iran and the KSA, 2) political sectarianism (*taifiyya*) among sectarian groups such as the MB, Wahabis and Shia, often conducted through political agents like state and non-state actors, and 3) the civil and non-violent sect-sect theological sectarianism (*madhabiyya*) among those three sects. In the second chapter this new understanding of sectarianism is then applied on the domestic politics of the KRI. It is argued that while there is theological sectarianism in the KRI, there is no political sectarianism. The third chapter explores the foreign relations of the KRI. It argues that the KRI as an unrecognized state, acts rationally to survive. It evades sectarianism and deemphasizes its demands of international recognition. Alternatively, the KRI pursues 'Regional Acceptance Policy' within which the Kurdish leadership persuades the regional powers, especially Turkey and Iran, that the de facto state will not declare independence, in return, they ask regional powers' acceptance of the KRI as a legitimate actor with its unique status.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Throughout the 20th century ethno-nationalism was the strongest sentiment in the Middle East. Within the past decade or so, however, Islam's two main sectarian identities, Shia and Sunni, have become extraordinarily strong, if not stronger than ethno-national identities. The common understanding of the region's politics is that Iran, as a Shia majority country, has allied with the other Shia non-Persian countries and actors, such as Iraq and Hezbollah. The Sunni countries, on the other hand, have gathered around the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) against Iran or Shias in general. There is also, however, a common perception that Kurds are the only people in the Middle East who have not become sectarian. This research is to see whether this perception towards the Kurds is true, and if it is, why? The first chapter argues that the English term "sectarianism" fails to explain the current politics of the Middle East. Instead, it is argued, there are two different forms of sectarianism in Islam; one is about theological disagreements, which in Arabic is called "*madhabiya*", the other is about the political competition among the various Muslim groups which in Arabic is called "*taifiya*". Regardless of the religious factor, states of the Middle East act rationally based on geopolitical realities. Political sectarianism comes emerges especially when those sectarian groups mobilize under political parties and armed militia groups. Sects and states sometimes cooperate for mutual interests and hence it appears that the entire conflicts of the region are driven by sectarian motivations. The second and third chapters then explore sectarianism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) within this new understanding. The KRI acts like the state actors based on its interests and not its Sunni sectarian identity. Contrary to the common perception towards the unrecognized state which assumes that the KRI's ultimate goal should be international recognition (IR), it is here argued that the KRI prioritizes 'regional acceptance' (RA) over IR. Within the KRI there is theological sectarianism among Salafists, Sufis, and political Islamists. However, there is no political sectarianism because the Kurdish government has neutralized and unarmed the sectarian groups.

Acknowledgements

The idea of this research was born out of a discussion I had with my PhD program supervisor, Professor Ariel Ahram, on the role of the mutual Sunni identity in the rapprochement between Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) between 2009 and 2014. The idea then was broadened to the KRI's place within the larger sectarian picture of the Middle East. In November 2017 professor Ahram told me about a panel at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington DC, as he always updated me with the latest events, books and sources on my project. The event was organized to discuss Frederik Wehrey's book, "Beyond Sunni and Shia".[1] At the end of the panel, the moderator asked everyone in the room, including the contributors to the book and the audiences: while it seems like even Zeidis and Alevites are becoming Shias, why the Iraqi Kurds never became Sunnis?[2] The question appeared to have puzzled everyone since nobody had the answer, except someone among the audiences who suggested that Kurds have a national cause and not a religious one. I realized at that moment that I needed to construct my research around this question. My journey started from there, and from that day on this research encompassed more areas of the political science such as the de facto states literature and the international relations theories. This journey was not an easy one, but it became bearable and the outcome was made possible by the continuous support of my advisor, professor Ahram. Hereby I have to express my deepest and most sincere gratitude to him. I was lucky to tell my classmates and everyone around me that "my advisor is more concerned about my project that I am!". He would send me every resource that he could get his hands on, as soon as they were being published. Additionally, professor Ahram's tremendous expertise and knowledge on almost every corner of the Middle East politics enriched this project to the fullest.

I also have to extend my gratitude to the rest of the committee members. Professor Joel Peters from the Virginia Tech's School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) especially contributed to one of the most important aspects of this research: international relations theories. Professor Peters made sure that my research does not limit itself to the practice only and would pull me back to the theoretical world every time I lost the track. Professor Giselle Datz, also from the SPIA, helped this project by providing the perspectives from an outsider. Without her brilliant suggestions and challenging questions, my research might have ended up concerning only the experts of the Kurdish politics. Special thanks to the fourth member of the committee, Professor Mustafa Gurbuz. As an outside member of the VT committee, Dr. Gurbuz was always available to answer my questions, whether on the phone or in person. He was especially a great asset to my project by being an expert of Kurdish politics in Turkey and Syria. His knowledge on the Kurdish politics in other parts of the greater Kurdistan taught me a lot of relevant matters of the Iraqi Kurds.

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[1] "Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East". Frederic Wehrey, ed. Oxford University Press; 1 edition (February 1, 2018)

[2] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Sectarianism and Conflict in the Middle East" November 14, 2017. Link: https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/11/14/sectarianism-and-conflict-in-middle-east-event-5737

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Introduction

Sectarianism has become an attractive term and a popular approach among many scholars of the Middle East. They tend to picture the new regional order of the Middle East as a rivalry between Shia and Sunni, led by Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) respectively. Therefore, according to the literature on sectarianism of the Middle East, most of the state and non-state actors of the region have jumped on the band wagon and sided with one of these two camps. Scholars have studied sectarianism in in much of the Middle East and the Muslim World, from the Arab Gulf to the Levant, from Iraq to Iran and even Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, Kurds, as significant players of the region, have been left out within the context of sectarianism. Scholars have not explicitly pointed out why they are disinterested in sectarianism among the Kurds; it might be due to the perception that the Kurds are mostly Sunnis who have an ethnic and not a religious cause. For example, according to Bahout "identity reformations tends to express itself in terms of sect in Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, or elsewhere in the Levant and in the Gulf – where Sunnis, Shia, Christians and other minorities often coexist. It tends to do so more in ethnic terms elsewhere – Kurds or Turkmen in northern Syria and Iraq..."[3] The main aim of this research is to look at sectarianism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and find out whether or not of this perception is true.

This research is comprised of three independent but intertwined parts. In this first part, the argument of the Shia-Sunni conflict between Iran and the KSA is completely rejected. Instead, this research provides a more sophisticated explanation. It argues that there are three layers of interaction among the Middle Eastern actors: state to state, sect to sect, and state to sect:

1) States of the Middle East are as rational as any other states in the world in that they act in their own best interest. maximize their power, balance against a perceived threat, and balance the regional power.

2) Iran and the KSA are not the only two leading players of the region, Turkey constitutes the third corner of the triangle of power in the Middle East

3) There *is* sectarianism in the region, but the English words "sectarianism" cannot explain its true nature in the Middle East, rather, it is explained in the first part, there are two different forms of sectarianism in the Middle East:

   a. Theological sectarianism (*Madhabiyya* in Arabic): This is a non-violent form of sectarianism among three main sects of the region: Shia, Wahhabism, and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), and hence this paper also rejects the Shia versus Sunnis as a whole. Theological sectarianism manifests itself mostly through civil means such as fatwas, books, and media.

   b. Political sectarianism (*Taifiyya* in Arabic): it is when those three sects either mobilize under political entities such as political parties (e.g. Salafist Al-Nour Party and MB's Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt), and militia (e.g. ISIS and Hezbollah), or when they cooperate with state actors and work

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[3] Josef Bahout. "The Unravelling of Taif, the limits of sect-based power-sharing in Lebanon" In "Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East". Frederic Wehrey, ed. Oxford University Press; 1 edition (February 1, 2018) page 136

together for mutual benefit between the sect and the state (e.g. Wahhabis and the state of Saudi Arabia). Political sectarianism usually takes a violent form.

4) Sometimes the sect and the state merge into one entity and it becomes difficult to separate them from each other, such as the case of Iran where the Twelver Shia imams and the state of Iran act as one entity and are inseparable.

5) Sectarian identities are among many other identities that states take advantage of in order to maximize their power and further their regional hegemony. There are other identities that states still use such ethnic identities.

The literature review section explains the existing understanding towards sectarianism within a theoretical framework. It focuses on two main theories: Instrumentalism and Primordialism. Instrumentalism explains how elites utilize sectarian identities for their won interest. Whereas Primordialism traces back the sectarian violence to the ancient hatred. I argue that both of these two theories alone fail to explain sectarianism. While Instrumentalism better explains political sectarianism, Primordialism explains theological sectarianism. Therefore, I take the middle ground between the two theories to explain two sides of the same coin.

In the first section of the analysis I shed light on five key events between 2001 and 2011 that changed the regional order of the Middle East and hence prepared the ground conducive for the current "sectarianism": 1) the Justice and Development Party (AKP) coming to power in Turkey in 2002, 2) the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, 3) the sectarian war between Shia and Sunnis in Iraq from 2006, 4) US withdrawal from Iraq between 2007-2011, and 5) Arab Spring in 2011.

The rest of the paper provides case studies of intra-group conflict within Sunnis and itner-group-cooperation between Sunnis and Shias to show that there is not a wholistic Sunnis enmity against the entire Shia. For example, some sections are dedicated to demonstrating the rivalry between Turkey and the KSA, Wahhabism and the MB, and inter-group cooperation between the MB and Shia, Turkey and Iran.

First it briefly distinguishes theological and political sectarianism and explains how the three main Muslim groups all equally have theological schisms among each other. It explains that there are intra-group theological disagreements between Wahhabism and the MB, both which are Sunnis. The section also refers to the inter-group theological similarities between the MB and Shia.

The next section focuses on explaining the current regional order starting from the Arab Spring. It argues that initially Turkey and the KSA were allies in Syria. However, since each was motivated by the idea of dominating and leading the Muslim Word, their disagreements and competition elsewhere, such as in Libya and Egypt, damaged their alliance and eventually separated their ways in Syria. This section also explains the changing relations between the once-allies MB and the KSA. A big portion of the section is dedicated to explaining how Turkey-Iran-MB cooperation worried the KSA and ended with a disaster for the MB.

The following section explains the MB-Iran cooperation. In 2004 Turkey hosted a summit between the heads of the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood (IOMB) and Iranian Quds forces in Istanbul. Plans were discussed on how to fight the KSA. Then it illustrates how the Qatar blockade and the Khashoggi murder further

sabotaged the relations between Turkey/BM and the KSA. It then details the cold war between Turkey and the KSA that started from 2016 and continues to this day.

Hence, first part concludes, there is no Shia-Sunni conflict between Iran and the KSA. Rather, there are three main regional powers, Turkey, the KSA and Iran, each trying to dominate the region and lead the Muslim World. On the other hand, there are three main Muslim groups, Wahhabis, Shia and the MB who each have ancient theological disagreements. Those three groups sometimes mobilize under political parties are militia and hence add a political dimension to the sectarianism. At the same time, those sects make alliances with the states to benefit from each other.

With separating the two forms of sectarianism, the second paper then applies this new understanding on the KRI. It argues that although the majority of the KRI are Sunnis, there is theological sectarianism in the KRI among Sufis, purist Salafists and jihadi Salafists. Although some Islamists mobilize under political parties, such as the MB affiliated Islamic Union of Kurdistan (IUK), political sectarianism is so minimal that we can argue that it does not exist in the KRI. That is because: a) sectarianism among various groups has not taken a violent form and still remains within the theological discussions, b) Salafists, who constitute a major sectarian front, have not mobilized under any political party or militia.

The paper also argues that Islam in Kurdistan was historically dominated by Sufism. However, under the regional and global events on the other hand, and due to the impact of literacy and mass communications on the other, part of Sufism evolved into Salafism and hence it led to schism among Sunni Kurds.

The first section of the analysis explains the emerging role of religious leaders on the political field in Kurdistan in late 19th and early 20th centuries. It argues that Kurdish nationalism, before secular Kurds promoted it through education throughout the 20th century, first emerged among Sufi leaders and mosques of Kurdistan in the mid-19th century. The leaders of Sufi orders initiated Kurdish nationalism and rose to power because: 1) sheikhs were the literate elites of Kurdish society, 2) the identity of *tariqat* (Sufi orders) goes beyond tribal identity and hence was more effective in mobilizing larger numbers of Kurdish tribes under a more encompassing identity, 3) the political competition among rival Kurdish municipalities upset the population and instead made sheikhs more favorable, 4) sheikhs' revolutions were demanding political as well as religious rights from the secular regimes of the states Kurds were divided over, hence sheikhs became even more popular among the conservative Kurdish society.

The second section demonstrates the birth of Islamists in Iraqi Kurdistan. It explains how the MB emerged in Kurdistan in the mid-20th century and how this group got into militant activities and was influenced by the ideology of Qutb's Jihadism. This section describes Islamists of that time as ethno-nationalists and relatively united. However, some local, regional, and global events impacted the Kurdish Islamist groups, such as the collapse of the Kurdish rebellion in 1975, the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets, and the first gulf war in 1991. By then, many Kurdish Islamists evolved into anti-Kurdish nationalism Salafists and became pro Pan-Islamic jihadists. The third section covers from 1991 to 2003 and illustrates the disintegration of Islamists of Kurdistan into of numerous groups and their eventual demise.

The last section is the most important and the main part of the second paper. It demonstrates, with first hand data such as the results of a survey and interviews with

relevant Kurdish religious leaders, that literacy and mass media have enabled Kurds to learn more about religion, not from local imams who once were the only literate ones, but rather through the internet and social media. Sectarian groups use social media to spread their ideologies, and literate people use the ability of reading to dive more into small details of religion. Hence, theological sectarianism among different Sunni groups of the KRI is increasing and has led to societal division and domestic violence.

The third paper is about the KRI's alignment with the regional blocs of power, in other words, the KRI's foreign policy. This paper argues that the KRI as a de facto state, like the state actors, pursues a rational foreign policy and not a sectarian one. To survive and to achieve its dream of independence, the KRI builds state institutions, and activates its ethnic and not sectarian identity. The KRI emboldens its ethnic identity to differentiate itself from the rest of Iraq. That way it can justify its future separation demands by emphasizing on its unique identity among Arab, Shia, Sunni identities. If Kurds activate their Sunni identity, they will be depicted as any other Sunni groups in Iraq and their demands for separation based on their ethnic identity will be baseless.

Although the KRI leadership practically works to build an independent state, they know that achieving international recognition (IR) at this time is quite impossible, therefore they pursue a less risky alternative policy: regional acceptance (RA). Regional acceptance is to convince the regional powers that the KRI will not declare independence and in return the Kurdish leadership asks them to accept the KRI as a legitimate regional actor with its unique status inside Iraq. In return, the regional powers, especially the KRI's immediate neighbors, Iran and Turkey, accept the KRI and diplomatically interact with it, and enhance their trade relations. However, the two countries also control the KRI and weaken it to ensure that it cannot become fully independent. Ankara and Tehran directly interact with the Kurdish political parties within the KRI in order to empower one against the other, turn them against each other, and keep the KRI weak enough to remain under their control. In the literature review I compare the RA and IR policies as:

IR	RA
Difficult to achieve	Easier to achieve
It is a long-term *ambition*	It is an immediate *necessity*
It provides benefits of involving in international relations, e.g. treaties	It provides the benefit to interact with regional counties e.g. signing trade agreements
It requires a formal procedure towards becoming a UN member	No formal procedure involved
Once attained, it cannot be easily taken away	It can be taken away

The first section of the analysis focuses on the pre-2003 era of Iraqi Kurdistan. Before 2003 Iraqi Kurds did not have a unified de facto state. Between 1991 and 2003 the autonomous region of northern Iraq was controlled by militia-like Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) each running local administrations in Erbil and Suleymaniya respectively. Turkey at that time remained relatively distant from the Iraqi Kurdistan and was only involved during the civil war between the KDP and PUK. Turkey supported the KDP to create its buffer zone while Iran

backed the PUK. Iran, however, was closely monitoring and interacting with the political parties, especially Islamists. Tehran had enough leverage in the Kurdistan to be able to "divide and rule" those political Islamists.

Section two and three examine the official foreign policy of the the KRI as a unified entity with its own Department of Foreign Relation (DFR). It is argued that the KRI between 2003 and 2014 successfully utilized the RA policy which benefitted the KRI in most ways. Turkey and Iran enhanced their relations with the KRI. Eventhough the KRI had better relations with Turkey, this had nothing to do with the Kurdish and Turkish mutual Sunni identity. Rather the KRG was afraid to get too close to Iran due to Iran's bad relations with the KRI's patron state, the US. Moreover, Turkey is also a more important actor for the KRI; Turkey is an ally of the US, it is a gate towards Europe, and the second largest army of the NATO.

During that time, the KRG placated Turkey, had good relations with Iran, its economy boomed, and it enjoyed maximum autonomy. Form 2014-2017 however, the KRG shifted its foreign policy from RA to IR. It held an independence referendum in September 2017. The reason behind this sudden change of policy was because 1) Iraq was too weak and had lost much of its territory to ISIS, 2) Kurds had already taken control over the disputed territories, 3) the RA policy had made Turkey and Iran tolerant enough that the KRG thought that the two countries would go as far as recognizing the KRI independence. Contrary to the expectations of the Kurdish leadership, tThis bold move was met by harsh international and regional backlash. Turkey and Iran assisted Iraq in suppressing the Kurdish desire of independence through a bloody war. The KRI lost 51% of its land, most of the antimony it enjoyed was taken away, and its relations with its neighbors deteriorated. From 2017 until present the Kurdish leadership changed their foreign policy back to the RA and to some extent remedied the KRI relations with Iran and Turkey.

Chapter 1:

Realpolitik, Political and Theological Sectarianism: Differentiating between the role of geopolitics and religion in the Middle East politics

Abstract

Sectarianism has become the magic word that many scholars and politicians describe the current Middle East politics with. The term is usually equated to Shia-Sunni conflict between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). In this paper I refuses this generalization and, in contrast, argue that there are three tiers of relations among regional actors: 1) state to state realpolitik, which is based on geopolitical realities among Turkey, Iran and the KSA, 2) political sectarianism (taifiyya) among sectarian groups such as the MB, Wahabis and Shia, often conducted through political agents like state and non-state actors, and 3) the civil and non-violent sect to sect theological sectarianism (madhabiyya) among those three sects.

Introduction

When looking at the regional politics of the Middle East many scholars, experts and politicians see sectarianism as an essential component. They, however, disagree over the causes of this sectarianism. We can divide them over two camps: Primordialists and Instrumentalists. Primordialists attribute the conflict between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to the centuries-old Shia-Sunni rift starting from the 7th century. This camp places the sectarian division at the core of the game. Instrumentalists, in contrast, emphasize on geopolitics as the primary end and treat sectarianism as the secondary phenomena. They argue that sectarianism is merely an instrument at the hands of the self-interest politicians to serve their domestic and geopolitical interests. Nevertheless, Primordialists and Instrumentalists both see a Shia-Sunni conflict in the Middle East which is equivalent to Iran-KSA conflict.

The politics of the Middle East, however, is more complicated than the simple equation above. Why did Sunni Arab counties and Turkey part ways in the Syrian civil war in 2016? Why is there a rivalry between two Sunni counties, the KSA and Turkey, in places like Libya and Egypt? Why does the KSA cooperate with the Marxist-Leninist Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in northeastern Syria against Turkey? Why did Iran and Turkey, one Shia and one Sunni, back Qatar during the 2017 blockade? How do the good relations between Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) fit the Shia-Sunni conflict?

In this paper I take a middle ground between Primordialism and Instrumentalism. I argue that both theories explain different tiers of relations in the Middle East. Once we are able to differentiate among those tiers, we see the plausibility of both theories. There are three different tiers of interaction among regional actors of the Middle East. First, there is state-state realpolitik. The relations among the region's nation states are driven by geopolitical realities. There are cases where they cooperate and there are areas where their interests collide. The three main regional powers (Iran, KSA and Turkey), however, each pursues an expansionist policy and attempts to dominate the region. The three countries

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also form alliances with one another to balance the power in the region. While Turkey competes with Iran in Syria, for instance, it sides with Iran over the Qatar blockade against the KSA and its allies.

The rest of the countries in the region each have joined one of those three countries to balance the power. Qatar has allied with Turkey. Iraq and Syria are on Iran's side. United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Oman, and Egypt side with the KSA. Jordan and Kuwait tend to remain neutral as much as they can, even if not always. From that point of view, states in the Middle East are rational actors like other parts in the world and act self-interestedly.
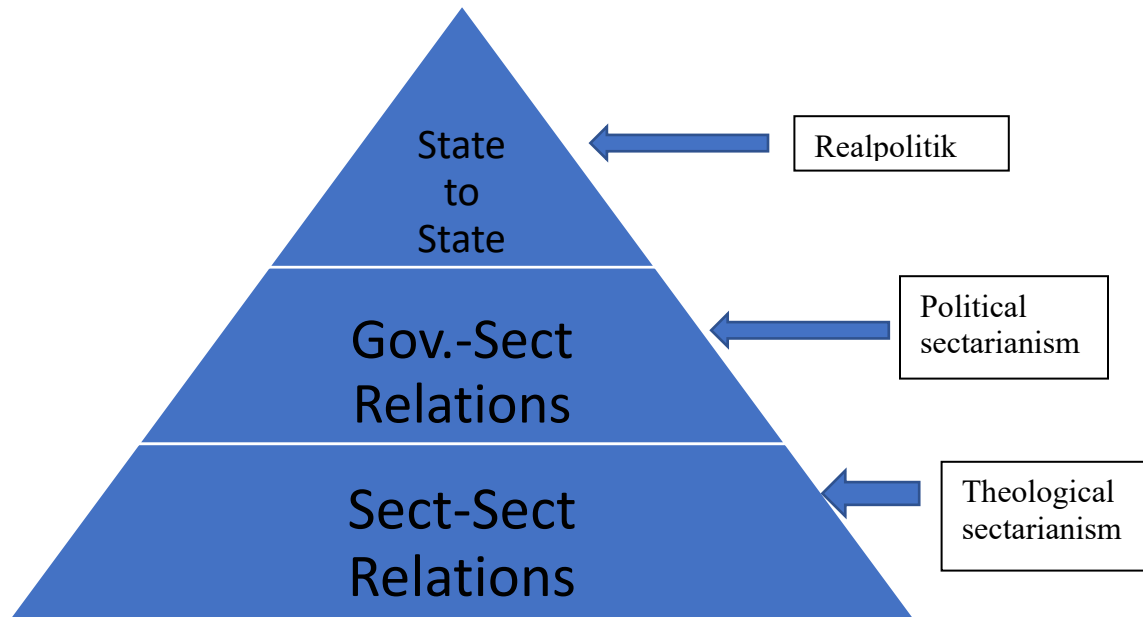
Parallel to the region's realpolitik there is sectarianism. The second and the third tiers of regional politics are the political and theological sectarianism among the sectarian groups: Shia, Wahhabis, and the MB. I argue that the English term of "sectarianism" alone cannot explain the region's current politics. In Islam there are two forms of sectarianism: the political form which in Arabic is called "طائفيه" (Taifiyya) and the theological form called "مذهبية" (Madhabiyya). Scholars usually use these two forms of sectarianism interchangeably.

In fact, the term sectarianism is elastic, and it can denote various forms of division, depending on where in the Middle East the terms are used. For example, among the Arab population in the south of Iraq sectarianism can mean Shia versus Sunni. However, in the north of the country, where the majority are Sunni Kurds, it can mean the division among the main four jurisprudence schools of Islam: Shafi'i, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Maliki.

Theological sectarianism is the doctrinal differences among those three sects and not only between Shia and all Sunnis. This form of sectarianism often manifests in Friday ceremonies, on media, press, religious texts and daily lives. For example, there is theological sectarianism between Salafists and Sufis in the KRI which has never taken a political shape. Neither side has taken up arms against the other nor they have established any political party or militia. This none-violent form of sectarianism in the Middle East is

ancient, like Primordialists clam, it has always been there before and after the current sectarian turmoil in the region.

Political sectarianism, however, is when those sectarian groups either mobilize under political non-state actors (e.g. Hezbollah, Islamic State, and Al-Nour Party), or use/make alliance with state actors to try to fight each. Political sectarianism was emboldened after regional powers started to take advantage of those sectarian groups especially after 2003 and utilized them to expand their influence beyond their borders. That is what Instrumentalism tries to explain. This form of sectarianism a) can be among sectarian groups themselves, e.g. war between Al-Qaeda and Shia militia affiliated with Muqtada Sadr in Iraq in 2006. Sectarian actors too, like state actors, cooperate and compete amongst each other. Wahhabism and the MB are both Sunnis and yet the conflict between the two is as heated as the conflict between Shia and Wahhabism. In contrast there are many instances of cooperation between Shia and the MB against Wahhabism. b) the sectarian groups can be used as proxies by state actors against each other (e.g. Hezbollah vs. Jabhat Nusra, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) in Syria).

Theological Sectarianism	Political Sectarianism
Dispute is over theological differences	Dispute is over political differences
Conducted through civil means such as mosques, media, and fatwas.	Conducted through political entities such as political parties, militia, and state actors
Has mostly societal ramifications	Has political and societal ramifications
Usually non-violent	Usually violent
Can best be explained through Primordialism	Can best be explained through Instrumentalism

When it comes to political sectarianism it is often difficult to differentiate the state actors from the sectarian actors because sometimes when the states get involved in the sectarian conflict they act as the sect itself. The sect and the nation-state can sometimes even converge and become one agent, like the case of Iran where the Twelver Shias and the state of Iran operate as one.

Finally, it is very important, for the sake of clarity, to emphasize that sectarian identities are among *many* other identities that the three regional powers utilize. Turkey, Iran and the KSA *mostly*, but not *only*, use sectarian groups to increase their regional leverage. There are other identities and groups that those states utilize for the same purpose of regional competition. For example, Turkey uses the MB to mobilize Sunni Arabs in Northern Syria against the Assad regime and the Kurdish led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). But it also uses its Turkic identity to gain support from the Turkmen of Iraq and Syria. Iran on the other hand uses Shia identity in the south of Iraq to make alliance with the Shia population there and increase its influence. It then uses Islamic (broader) identity to approach the Sunni Kurdish groups in the north or Hamas in Gazza. Iran then uses ancient Iranian and the ethnic identity between Kurds and Persians to befriend the secular Kurdish groups in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The KSA, on the other hand, mobilizes its neighbors under the Gulf identity in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The kingdom also uses its Sunni identity to influence Sunni Arabs in Iraq, yet it cooperates with the secular Sisi government in Egypt and communist Kurdish YPG in Syria.

Literature Review

According to the growing literature on sectarianism in the Middle East interstate alliances and intercommunal relations are no longer shaped by supra-ethnic identities, such as Pan-Arabism during the 1950s. According to Nasr, for example, it "is rather the old feud between Shi'as and Sunnis that forges attitudes, defines prejudices, draws political boundary lines"[4] Iran, on the one hand, is leading the Shia bloc in the Middle East comprised of Iraq and Syria, as well as some non-state Shia actors such as Hezbollah of Lebanon, Houthis of Yemen,and Hashd Al-Sha'abi (Popular   Mobilization Forces, PMU) of Iraq. The KSA, on the other hand, leads the Sunni front with countries like UAE, Egypt and Bahrain. The regional conflict between these two blocs of power has also deeply riven citizens from the grassroots over sectarian identities.

The Zaidis of Yemen and the Alawites of Syria, for instance, used to barely associate themselves with the Shia sect. Now they both play important roles as some of the key actors among the Shia forces. The Sunni Arabs of Iraq, who once were the main rivals of the KSA, now seek protection from Riyadh against the aggression of the Shia regime at home. As Bahout says: even Christians of Lebanon have not been able to escape from Islamic sectarianism; they are sometimes referred to as the "Shia Christians" and "Sunni Christians" depending on which bloc of power they support.[5]

Most plausible theories that explain sectarianism in the Middle East, as mentioned before, are Primordialism and Instrumentalism.

1. Primordialism

Primordialists trace back conflicts between social groups to centuries-old ancient hatred. They view "sectarian identities as largely fixed collectivities influenced by deep ancient hatreds and irreconcilable differences"[6]. Biologically belonging to an ethnic group creates the in-group and out-group boundaries which result in stereotypes and eventually conflict. Many Western scholars and politicians see sectarianism in the Middle East as the same old conflict between Shia and Sunni that started fourteen centuries ago. In his 2016 State of the Union Address the former US president Barak Obama said: "The Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia."[7] Thomas Friedman described the region's turmoil as a fight "over who is caliph, who is the rightful heir to the Prophet Muhammad from the seventh century — Sunnis or Shiites —"[8] In a 2016 report, the Council on Foreign Relations wrote that "an

[4] Vali Nasr, 'The Shia Revival. How Conflict Within Islam will Shape the Future'. New York and London. W. W. Norton & Company; 1st edition

[5]Josef Bahout, "Sectarianism and Conflict in the Middle East". (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017). Link: https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/11/14/sectarianism-and-conflict-in-middle-east-event-5737

[6] Hassan Al-Qarawee, 'Heightened Sectarianism in the Middle East: Causes, Dynamics and Consequences'. ISPI; Analysis No. 205, November 2013. page 1

[7] Barak Obama. 'Remarks of President Barack Obama – State of the Union Address As Delivered'. The White House Archives. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address

[8] Thomas L. Friedman. 'The World's Hot Spot'. New York Times. 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/19/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-worlds-hot-spot.html

ancient religious divide is helping fuel a resurgence of conflicts in the Middle East and Muslim countries."[9]

What explains the timing of this high wave of sectarianism? Primordialists argue that this ancient conflict was suppressed by secular authoritarian Arab regimes throughout the majority of the past century until the so-called Arab Spring in 2011. For example, Saddam Hussein banned Salafism as well as Shia mobilizations. Although Baath's oppression of Shia might be interpreted as sectarianism itself, Baath party was in fact not only against Shia for their sect, but also against Sunnis and Kurds and whoever stood against Baathism's Arab nationalism. Once the popular revolutions swept away some of those decades-old dictators, sectarian entrepreneurs once again were able to ignite the fire of sectarianism. Once the sectarian conflict started, leaders became part of it because they themselves belong to an ethno-sectarian group and are emotionally bound to it. Primordialists therefore, see the leaders of the Muslim World as the "victims" of sectarianism and not the reason behind it.[10]

Some scholars such as Vali Nasr and Geneive Abdo often support this approach. Although they are both convinced that the regional leaders take advantage of sectarianism to perpetuate their power and influence, they argue that sectarianism is also driven by bottom-up genuine theological differences between Shia and Sunnis going back to the aftermath of the death of the Prophet. Nasr writes that the Shia-Sunni conflict "is at once a struggle for the soul of Islam—a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history—and a manifestation of the kind of tribal wars of ethnicities and identities, so seemingly archaic at times, yet so surprisingly vital, with which humanity has become wearily familiar."[11]

Abdo takes a more moderate approach compared to Nasr's and believes that what is now a sectarian civil war began with secular reformist demonstrations in 2011[12]. The authoritarian rulers of the Arab world then highjacked the uprisings and brushed them with sectarian traits to diverge the protestors.[13] For example, the Bahraini royal family accused protestors of being Iran's agents, while Assad accused the KSA and radical Sunni Islamists of being behind the protests in his country. The differences between Shia and Sunni protesters in countries like Syria and Bahrain were emboldened over time and turned into a genuine conflict at the grassroots. Dictators who collapsed like Saddam Hussein or got weakened like Assad then left behind two oppressed groups (Shia and Sunni) who now fight over power. More dangerously, they fight over who is the true Muslim and which form of Islam should be accepted as the official religion of the state, Abdo adds.

An opinion survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life shows "a widespread belief in most Arab countries that Shi'a are not real Muslims. This was true particularly in countries where Shi'a represent only a small minority. According to the survey, at least 40% of Sunni do not accept the Shi'a as fellow Muslims."[14]

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[9] Council on Foreign Relations, *The Sunni-Shia Divide.* 2017. Link
https://www.cfr.org/interactives/sunni-shia-divide#!/sunni-shia-divide
[10] Geneive Abdo, "The New Sectarianism. The Arab Uprisings and the rebirth of the Shia-Sunni divide", New York. Oxford University Press, 2017
[11] Nasr, The Shia Revival, 20
[12] Abdo, 'The New Sectarianism,'
[13] Abdo, 'The New Sectarianism,'
[14] Ibid

2. Instrumentalism

Sectarian identities according to Instrumentalism can be tools used by elites to serve their personal and/or state interests. Most of the scholars of sectarianism, such as Hashemi and Postel[15], Wehrey[16], Haddad[17], Makdisi[18], Al-Qarawee[19], Hassan[20] and Fawcett[21] approach sectarianism from an Instrumentalist point of view.

Instrumentalists tend to "exclusively focus on the ways elites use sectarian categories and discourses to promote their agendas" Al-Qarawee writes[22]. Hashemi also rejects the paradigm of "ancient sectarian hatreds" and "locates the roots of sectarian conflict in the late twentieth century and not in the seventh century."[23] Hashemi and Postel in their co-edited book *'Sectarianization'* propose the term "sectarianization" as an alternative to sectarianism as a way of explaining politics of the Middle East[24]. Sectarianization, Hashemi and Postel clarify, is "a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers. Class dynamics, fragile states, and geopolitical rivalries also shape the sectarianization process."[25]

Makdisi takes the harshest stance against the "sectarianism" narrative and writes that "the idea of a "sectarian" Middle East causes far more obfuscation than illumination."[26] He believes that sectarianism is wrongfully "characterized as the violent and illiberal manifestation of competing, age-old antagonistic religious identities in the region."

In general, there are three factors which Instrumentalists believe lead to ethno-sectarian conflict: a) weak/failed state b) geopolitical rivalry and c) authoritarianism/lack of legitimacy.

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[15] Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, "Sectarianization. Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East". New York. Oxford University Press, 2017

[16] Frederic Wehrey. 'Beyond Sunni and Shia. The roots of sectarianism in a changing Middle East', ed. New York. Oxford University Press 2017

[17] Fanar Haddad, "Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity". Oxford University Press; 1 edition (May 3, 2011)

[18] Usama Makdisi. "The Mythology of the Sectarian Middle East." Center for the Middle East." Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. 2017

[19] Al-Qarawee. "Heightened Sectarianism…'

[20] Hassan Hassan. "The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Contex' in 'Beyond Sunni and Shia. The roots of sectarianism in a changing Middle East', ed. Frederic Wehrey, New York. Oxford University Press 2017) 20

[21] Louse Fawcett. 'International Relations of the Middle East' 4th Edition. Oxford University Press; 4 edition (July 5, 2016)

[22] Al-Qarawee, Heightened Sectarianism, 1

[23] Nader Hashemi. "Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Salience of Authoritarianism over Theology". Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1 (May 2016), pp. 65

[24] Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, 'Sectarianization…'

[25] Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, 'Sectarianization…'

[26] Ussama Makdisi, 'The Mythology…'

a. Weak/failed states

According to Hashemi and Postel[27], Al-Qarawee[28], Cleary[29], and Fawcett[30], ethno-sectarian violence is more likely to happen in weak/failed states through various mechanisms. A weak state often fails to provide security to its people. Thus, people take up arms to defend themselves. In that case, a sect is more likely to mobilize under the identity of the sect.

After Islamic State also knows as ISIS controlled some 60,000 square miles in Syria and Iraq in mid-2014, the most popular Shia leaders Ayatollah Sistani issued a fatwa asking for Shia to mobilize under the PMU. PMU militia is now the most powerful armed force in Iraq that in some instances challenged the Iraqi army and National Police.

b. Geo-political rivalry

When states compete for regional leadership, they tend to manipulate supra-state identities in order to attract people outside their territories and eventually mobilize them either to destabilize or control neighboring countries. From that perspective, sectarianism in the Middle East is the result of rivalry between the KSA and Iran over the leadership of the region. Iran activates and manipulates Shia identity which encompasses a wider range of people in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and some other Arab Gulf countries to mobilize them. The KSA, on the other hand, utilizes the same technique and manipulates its Sunni identity to mobilize Sunnis outside its borders. Riyadh and Tehran have been able to successfully do so and mobilize tens of thousands of militias throughout the region to carry out proxy-wars on their behalf.

c. Authoritarianism/lack of legitimacy

According to Hashemi and Postel "the theme of political authoritarianism is central to the sectarianization thesis… Authoritarianism, not theology, is the critical factor that shapes the sectarianization process".[31] Authoritarian states in the Muslim world "suffer from multiple political, economic, environmental, and demographic crises that have steadily become worse with each passing decade. Their inability to democratically address these problems, coupled with expanding corruption, nepotism, and cronyism, has produced a crisis of legitimacy."[32]

As a counter reaction, the disadvantaged communities resist and mobilize under various identities, demanding reform, social and economic justice. Then dictators deliberately manipulated sectarian identities and deflect the popular demands for political and economic reforms, and implement the strategy of divide-and-rule.[33] Regimes strengthen one opposition group against another. "This gives ruling elites greater room to maneuver in the short term, at the cost of social cohesion in the long term."[34]

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[27] Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, 'Sectarianization…'
[28] Hassan Al-Qarawee. 'Heightened Sectarianism…'
[29] Seán Cleary, 'Identity Politics, Sectarian Conflict, and Regional Political Rivalry in the Middle East' Trilogue Salzburg, 2016
[30] Louse Fawcett. 'International Relations…'
[31] Hashemi and Postel, 'Sectarianization…'
[32] Ibid
[33] Ibid
[34] Hashemi and Postel, 'Sectarianization…'

Conclusion of the literature

Primordialism and Instrumentalism both cannot alone explain sectarianism in the Middle East. While Primordialism can better explain the theological sectarianism, Instrumentalism is better to explain political sectarianism. That is because most the theological disagreements that Muslim sects argue over now have been there for centuries. For instance, the same doctrinal disputes that turned Hanbali followers against Shia in the 8th and 9th centuries are still relevant and play important roles in dividing Shia-Sunny societies. Instrumentalism, in contrast, tends to focus on the existing geopolitics and explains events from the current realities' point of view. Geopolitical realities of hundreds of years ago cannot still explain the relations between modern nations state of the Middle East.

Critiques of Primordialism argue that this theory cannot explain why and how the conflict starts from the first place. According to Hashemi[35] Primordialism wrongfully assumes that identities inevitably lead to conflict, while ignoring other factors such as sectarian entrepreneurs and contribution from the regime leaders. Dixon[36] writes that Primordialism cannot explain ethno-sectarian violence because it mainly explains the biological attributions of ethnicity and nationalism. Islam, Dixon adds, is not a biological feature, it is rather a universal religion which anyone can convert to. There are tens of ethnic groups who share the identity of Islam but are not necessarily in conflict. At the same time, there are homogenous ethnicities who belong to the same ethnic/biological group, yet they fight over ethno-sectarian identity. There are tens of thousands of Sunnis in the Syrian state army fighting Sunni insurgency groups. Hafez Assad, father of the current Syrian president Bashar Assad, who are currently identified as Shia Alawites, expelled and killed hundreds of Lebanon's Hezbollah members in 1980s.[37]

Instrumentalism is probably one of the most plausible theories that can explain ethno-sectarian violence in the Middle East. However, it overlooks the theological aspect of sectarianism. Just like how Primordialism depicts sectarianism only between Shia and Sunni, Instrumentalism also depicts the geopolitical rivalry only between Iran and the KSA as the representatives of the two sects respectively. It pays very little attention to Turkey, which is now one of the main three powers in the region besides Iran and the KSA. By isolating Turkey from the equation, scholars often fail to explain the larger intra-group conflict within Sunnis (e.g. Turkey-KSA) and the inter-group cooperation (e.g. Turkey-Iran).

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[35] Hashemi, 'Toward a Political Theory' 65
[36] Paul Dixon, "Beyond Sectarianism in the Middle East? Comparative Perspectives on Group Conflict," in Beyond Sunni and Shia. The roots of sectarianism in a changing Middle East, ed. Frederic Wehrey, New York. Oxford University Press 2017) 20
[37] Dixon, Beyond Sectarianism, 21

Analysis:

2002-2011: A Background of the Current Regional Order

Before 2002 regional powers of the Middle East were mostly busy with internal issues and their cross-border ambitions were limited. For example, Iran's foreign activities in the previous decade had waned "as the country focused on healing its war-torn economy," resulted from Iran-Iraq war. Turkey nationalist governments were busy with consolidating the state's Turkish identity and focusing on domestic issues such as the Kurdish separatist movements. The KSA was occupied with building infrastructure in its mostly desert land, education system, and consolidating national identity, unity and cohesion among its mostly tribal population. In other words, states in the Middle East were still taking shape, once they were consolidated by the early 21st century, they started to set ambition beyond their borders.

A series of important events from 2002 to 2011 prepared the ground for the current power competition among Turkey, Iran and the KSA. It is important to briefly touch upon five of the most significant of them: 1) the Justice and Development Party (AKP) coming to power in Turkey in 2002, 2) the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, 3) the sectarian war between Shia and Sunnis in Iraq from 2006, 4) US withdrawal from Iraq between 2007-2011, and 5) Arab Spring in 2011.

One of the most important events that changed the 21st century Middle East politics was Turkey's return to the regional politics as an engaging power after 2002. Until then the secular and Kemalist governments of Turkey had been trying their best to isolate Turkey from the Muslim World in general and the Middle East in particular. When the AKP won the general election in 2002, Turkey's overall domestic and most importantly foreign policy started to change slowly but dramatically. Religion became an essential element, particularly in foreign relations. The AKP originated from the previously banned Welfare Party which was founded on the MB's ideology. Ankara prioritized establishing friendly relationships with the Muslim World and the Middle East. Turkey further pursued a zero-problem foreign policy with all neighbors including Iran and the KSA. The first of a series of such changes was the attitude of AKP's Turkey towards the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Turkey refused to let the US use Turkish soil and especially its Incirlik base as a launching pad against Iraq. That did not prevent the US from removing Saddam Hussein from power, a fierce advocate of Arab nationalism. Shortly after that Iraq became a hotspot for insurgencies and terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda who launched daily attacks on the Shia population. The weak governments in Baghdad were unable to provide security to the people. Hence the people took up arms and mobilized under sectarian groups to protect themselves. Sectarian violence in Iraq peaked between 2006 and 2008.

The increasing violence in Iraq dragged the KSA, Turkey and other regional actors into the conflict. Iraq's failure and "the resulting change in the balance of power in the region brought Turkey and Saudi Arabia even closer together. Both were concerned about Iraq falling into the hands of their common rival, Iran, whose military and political

influence increased as a result of the invasion"[38]. Although Iran had supported Shia groups in Iraq for decades, with Hussein deposed, Iran got a free hand to further mobilize them.

Another very important factor that enabled regional powers to pursue a more active role in the region was the declining US role in the Middle East. "The failures of the 2003-11 occupation of Iraq, the decreasing importance of Gulf oil, the economic and military retrenchment following the 2008 financial crisis, and the election of Barack Obama, a critic of his predecessor's military adventures, all prompted reluctance in Washington to continue an active hegemony."[39] Once the superpower's influence in the region decreased, it left a power vacuum for the regional actors to fill.[40]

Finally, the Arab Spring became the shifting point and marked the beginning of a new regional order. The widespread protests mostly targeted the Arab republics who were the traditional advocates of nationalism, such as Libya, Syria and Egypt. Nationalism had constrained the regional influence of non-Arab states like Iran, for instance, within its borders. The demise of those Arab dictators not only undermined Arab nationalism, but also resulted in a number of weak states unable to provide security to their people. Just like Iraq, the lack of security encouraged people to mobilize under armed sectarian groups.

The rise of a cross-ethnic identity such as sectarian enabled non-Arab powers like Iran and Turkey to make alliance with those Arab sectarian groups benefiting from the mutual identities, thus expanding their influence beyond borders. The KSA, Turkey and Iran each attempt to establish a regional empire and lead the Muslim World. The KSA considers itself the rightful actor for this role as it is the birthplace of Islam and hosts the two holiest sites of the religion: Mecca and Medina. Turkey and Iran are the heirs of two dissolved empires: Ottoman Empire and Persian Empire respectively. Each of these states is trying to revive their lost empires or at least recreate a new model of them. An effective way to achieve this goal and expand their influence is by using sectarian groups as proxies throughout the region. Some of the most active sectarian groups in that regard are Shia, the MB, and Wahhabis.

Political vs. Theological sectarianism

Shia, Wahhabism and the MB are the main and most active sects of Islam. There is a non-violent theological sectarian rift among the three sect. This form of sectarianism, which in Arabic is called "Madhabyya", mostly manifests itself through the rhetoric of religious ceremonies, Friday speeches, press and media, and writing and fatwas of prominent imams of each sect such as Sistani, Qaradawi, and Ibn Baz. Each sect also has a different point of view towards politics and prescribes a different solution for the socio-political issues of the Muslim World. They inspire and directly or indirectly have established political entities such as Hezbollah, PMU, Hamas, Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The

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[38] Nader Habibi. "How Turkey and Saudi Arabia became frenemies – and why the Khashoggi case could change that". The Conversation. 2018. http://theconversation.com/how-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-became-frenemies-and-why-the-khashoggi-case-could-change-that-105021
[39] Christopher Phillips. 'Eyes Bigger than Stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Syria'. Middle East Policy, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, Spring 2017
[40] Fawaz Gerges, 'Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?' (Palgrave, 2012)

violent confrontations among some fractions of those groups is the political form of sectarianism, which in Arabic is called "Ta'ifyya".

Wahhabism is the main influential sect in the KSA. It is at odds with the MB on many theological and political matters. The MB leans towards Sufism which is different from that of Wahhabism. For example, revering Sheikhs, visiting the tombs of the dead, celebrating Mawlid (the observance of the birthday of the Prophet), which are commonly practiced by Sufis and Shias, are un-Islamic according to Wahhabism and can lead to excommunication.

When it comes to politics, the two sects are even in greater odds. The way they see the authority and the legitimacy of rulers and the paths towards the future of Islam is largely different. Wahhabists tend to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." Resorting to the Quranic verse "Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you" (An-nisa: 5) Wahhabis prohibit revolting against the rulers and disobeying them, no matter how corrupt they are. If someone is unhappy with the way a ruler governs, he/she needs to privately advice the ruler and try to correct him.

The MB, on the other hand, rejects this lenient approach. Frist of all, they argue, it is almost impossible for a regular citizen to see the king today, let alone dare to advice the king. Second, if a ruler is corrupt, no matter how religious, they should be removed and be replaced. Although the mainstream of the MB attempts to do so through civil means such as party politics and elections, there are fractions within the MB that believe in arms struggle and using violence to achieve this goal. Helfont writes:

> "the MB's "idea of an Islamic state would include many features of modernity such as elections and constitutions. Revolutionary Iran might be an example. The Brotherhood justifies the formation of this type of state on Islamic terms and through the modern discourse of anti-imperialism, nationalism, human rights, and democracy. The Wahhabists on the other hand desire a state based completely on "authentic" Islamic principles found in the canonical texts. A representative state might be Afghanistan under the Taliban: no elections, not justified by modern norms, no nationalism."[41]

The MB also shares many common grounds with Shia, especially with *Wilayati Fiqh* of the Islamic revolution. Badawi and al-Sayyad argue that "ideologically, both parties [the MB and Shia] advocate for the establishment of an Islamic state, religious proselytism (*daawa*), and Muslim unity. They also share some common geopolitical aims, including the need to confront Israel and liberate Palestine".[42]

The MB has also supported Iran on many regional issues such as the nuclear program and its conflict with Israel. Al-Qaradawi, one of the most prominent MB theological leaders and imams, "openly stated that a "nuclear Iran is not a threat" to the region, and that "it is obligatory on all Muslims to resist any possible attack the U.S. might launch against Iran."[43]

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[41] Samuel Helfont. "The Sunni Divide: Understanding Politics and Terrorism in the Middle East" Center on Terrorism and Counterterrorism. 2009: 23

[42] Badawi and al-Sayyad, "Mismatched Expectations", 2

[43] Helfont, "The Sunni Divide", 27

In every conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, the MB supports Hezbollah. Hezbollah also supports Hamas, a MB affiliated militia and political party. Moreover, "the Supreme Guide of the Brotherhood, Muhammad Mahdi Akif, offered unequivocal support for Hezbollah and throughout other Sunni Arab states, various branches of the Brotherhood largely followed the lead of their Egyptian counterparts by stressing unity with Iran and the Shias against the secular Sunni Regimes."[44]

The fall of regimes Arab dictators during the Arab Spring empowered those sectarian groups. They established more political parties and militias. Their increasing leverage attracted more collaboration with state actors. Throughout the rest of this paper, I will be providing cases of intra-Sunni competition between the KSA and Tukey, inter-group cooperation between Iran and Turkey, and I will write about intra-group cooperation between a state and a sect (Iran and the MB).

2011: The Arab Spring and Shifting Alliances

While the KSA perceived the Arab Spring as a threat to its domestic stability and regime survival, it saw the protests in Syria as an opportunity to remove its long rival regime of Assad. Riyadh worked with Sunni countries, including Turkey, to topple Iran's ally in Damascus. Turkey-KSA alliance in Syria was convenient because first, the conflict had taken a form of Shia vs. Sunni civil war. Given that Turkey and the KSA were both Sunnis, their common enemy was the Alevite-Shia alliance. Second, the Assad regime was against the interests of both Turkey and the KSA. For years Damascus had helped the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) against Ankara. Assad had also cultivated an alliance with Iran especially in their mutual cause against Israel, which was against the KSA's interests in its competition with Iran.

Yet, the Turkey-KSA alliance in Syria was fragile for a number of other reasons. The two counties had different visions for the post-Assad era. Each was supporting different sectarian groups. The KSA was especially unhappy with Turkey's support of radical jihadi groups such as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, Jabhat Al-Nusra, and later the alleged ISIS-Turkey cooperation[45]. Most importantly, the KSA and Turkey were competing elsewhere in the region such as in Libya and Egypt.

In Egypt, unlike Syria, the protests became a rivalry mainly among Sunnis forces. Iran had no presence there. Some of those Sunnis in Egypt, like the MB, were ideologically closer to Turkey. Most importantly, Mubarak regime, compared to Assad regime, fell quickly and the matter of succession became a concern between the KSA and Turkey. Each wanted a party loyal to them to replace Mubarak. The competition between the KSA and Turkey in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East became a challenge for their alliance in Syria as well.

Additionally, Turkey's involvement in those Arab countries soon exposed AKP's true ambitions. Erdogan began to take steps that showed his country's desire of leading the region through a model of neo-Ottoman Empire. Because "in the minds of those executing the policy, Turkey, as heir to the Ottoman Empire, is Islam's last fortress and the natural

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[44] Helfont, "The Sunni Divide", 26
[45] Harut Sassounian. 'Columbia University Researchers Confirm Turkey's Links to ISIS'. Armenian National Committee of America. https://anca.org/columbia-university-researchers-confirm-turkeys-links-to-isis/

leader of a revival of Muslim civilization."[46] The conditions that the Arab Spring brough about made Turkey's desires feasible therefore the timing was right. Turkey also posed a challenge to KSA's religious ideology. "Turkey is attempting to position its brand of Islam as a more tolerant, less extreme Sunni alternative to Saudi Wahhabism—and therefore more fit for regional leadership."[47]

Turkey's expansionist policies naturally made the KSA and its Arab allies less attracted to the Turkish promotion of religion and its involvement in the Arab politics. Some Saudi media started accusing Turkey "for dreaming of a 'Caliphate of the Brotherhood' and meddling in the internal affairs of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries."[48]

Turkey also cooperated with Iran on a number of issues that upset the KSA. Although Turkey was indirectly fighting Iran in Syria, their overall relationships under the AKP were dramatically enhanced. Trade volume between Iran and Turkey increased to $22 billion in 2012, an increase from $1.2 billion in 2001.[49] "Turkey ran a significant trade deficit that was offset by an ever-growing number of Iranian tourists. Lifting visa restrictions on Iranian nationals increased those numbers from less than 330,000 in 2001 to almost 1.9 million in 2011."[50] Iran is also "the second-largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey, behind Russia".[51]

Erdogan's "Islamist roots and discomfort towards secularism have made him much less inhibited by the theocratic nature of the Iranian regime and his increasingly authoritarian approach to governance and anti-Western foreign policy has strengthened the budding partnership.[52]

Turkey's frayed relations with the US and Israel were also among factors that brough Turkey closer to Iran. Turkey stood by Iran's side against many of the U.S. sanctions for most of the time. It has often refused to abide by the sanctions and cooperation with the U.S. against Iran. And when unwillingly adhered to the U.S. sanction on Iran, Turkey has sometimes helped Iran evade the sanction through what the former vice president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), Johnathan Schanzer calls,

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[46] Gonul Tol. "Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership: How the AKP Uses Islamic Soft Power". Foreign Policy. 2019. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-01-10/turkeys-bid-religious-leadership

[47] Tol. "Turkey's Bid…"

[48] Jameel Al-Theyabi. Turkish President's adviser Aktay: A motormouth with malicious intent" Saudi Gazette. 2019: http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/567588

[49] Vahid Yücesoy "The recent rapprochement between Iran and Turkey: is it durable or is it a relationship of convenience?" Turkish Studies. Volume 21, 2020 - Issue 2. 2019

[50] Kemal Kirişci. "Post-revolutionary Iran and Turkey at 40: Pragmatism and convergence". Brookings. 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/04/04/post-revolutionary-iran-and-turkey-at-40-pragmatism-and-convergence/

[51] Stephen Larrabee and Alireza Nader. "Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East". RAND National Defense Institute. 2013: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR258/RAND_RR258.sum.pdf

[52] Kirişci. "Post-revolutionary…"

"the largest sanctions evasion episode in modern history."[53] Between 2013-2014 Turkey masked tens of billions in dollars and gold from Turkey to Iran through "a complex network of businesses, banks, and front companies."[54]

Iran-MB-Turkey Rapprochement

While Turkey had enhanced relations with Iran, it had also cultivated an alliance with the MB throughout the region. "To enhance its soft power in the Middle East, the AKP has primarily relied on its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which does not have a chapter in Turkey but is closely aligned ideologically with the AKP." Turkey's rapprochement with the MB in Egypt was particularly a big concern of the KSA.

The ideology of the MB itself could threaten the future of Al Saud family. "During this period, some demands for reform were adopted by Brotherhood affiliates, which pushed the Saudi regime to turn against them." At the same time, as mentioned in the previous section, the MB theology is not compatible with Wahhabism, the main form of Islam in the kingdom. And traditionally the MB has not been anti-Iran as the KSA has wished for.

The MB-Iran relationships became even stronger during the Arab Spring. These uprisings were by nature compatible with the Islamic Revolution's ideology because its vision is to Muslim clerics rule in the Muslim countries. Of course, as long as it is not at the expense of Iran's allies like Assad. But Mubarak's replacement with a Brotherhood government would surly benefit Iran. Egypt has always been a point of interest for Iran. "Given its large population, border with Israel, and status as a member of the U.S.-backed regional camp since roughly 1979, remains a highly strategic location in which to make such inroads.[55] However, regimes in Egypt had not been as friendly to Iran as Iran has hoped for. Therefore, Iran could utilize the MB as a proxy against the Mubarak.

Once the MB rose to power in July 2012, Egypt and Iran established formal diplomatic relations. From 2012 to 2013 when the MB affiliate Mohamed Morsi was president of Egypt, the country's relations with Iran were at the healthiest level. Morsi became the first Egyptian president to visit Iran in August 2012. Six months later, then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Egypt to participate in an Islamic summit. "Iran also attempted to strengthen ties through proposed deals to boost Egypt's lagging economy. These offers included a package to promote Egyptian tourism to Iranians, provide oil shipments, and implement various trade agreements."[56] Iranian officials hoped that rapprochement would be the first step to ending its own regional isolation.[57]

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[53] Jonathan Schazner. "The Biggest Sanctions-Evasion Scheme in Recent History". The Atlantic. 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-turkey-gold-sanctions-nuclear-zarrab-atilla/549665/

[54] Schazner. "The Biggest Sanctions-Evasion…"

[55] Tamer Badawi and Osama al-Sayyad. "Mismatched Expectations: Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood After the Arab Uprisings", Canrengie Middle East Center. 2019. https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/19/mismatched-expectations-iran-and-muslim-brotherhood-after-arab-uprisings-pub-78621

[56] Badawi and al-Sayyad. "Mismatched Expectations'

[57] Badawi and al-Sayyad. "Mismatched Expectations'

The MB-Iran-Turkey rapprochement was a wakeup call to the KSA and its anti-Iran allies. Although the MB had enjoyed good relations with the KSA before 2011, "the kingdom began to adopt a new approach towards the Brotherhood"[58] for the aforementioned reasons. "The Saudi rulers feared that the Arab Spring could embolden Islamists and other opposition groups at home and worried that the Brotherhood's alleged pro-Iran sympathies could undermine the kingdom's efforts to balance the Islamic Republic."[59] From that perspective, the MB were viewed as a serious threat that needed to be eliminated.

After only one year of the MB reign in Egypt, the KSA and the UAE supported an Egyptian general with a military coup in July 2013 which not only ended the power of the MB, but also became a huge setback for the group. It ended the short-lived golden era of the MB in Egypt and also shattered Iranian's hope of rapprochement with the Sunni world. Tehran, alongside with Turkey, condemned the coup and expressed deep concerns over those developments which negatively affected its diplomatic relations with the KSA. Thousands of the MB members were killed, jailed, and its leadership escaped to exile: Qatar and Turkey.

The MB chose Qatar and Turkey for two reasons. First, the leadership of both countries have sympathy for the MB and are ideologically aligned. Just like the AKP, the Qatari royal family and the emir himself are influenced by the MB ideology. Second, both countries had unhealthy relationship with the KSA and hence the MB can be a good asset to be used against Riyadh. That naturally brough Qatar and Turkey closer.

Iran and the MB Conspire against the KSA in Turkey

The MB's roadmap to survival was not clear. While the leadership preferred to move to exile, young members demanded using violence and seeking help from Iran.[60] According to Badawi and al-Sayyad "this period of internal division offered Iran an opportunity to reestablish contacts with members from various Brotherhood factions without the presence of a centralized authority to veto communications."[61] Iran did that through various means, for instance inviting the MB leaders to "Islam-centric gatherings such as the Islamic Unity Forum"[62] or a secret summit in Turkey to conspire against the KSA.

In November 2019 The Intercept obtained a cable sent from an agent of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) to his superiors. The cable details a secret summit held between the leaders of the Iranian Quds Forces and the leadership of the MB in 2014. The location of the summit was a hotel in Istanbul, Turkey. "Turkey was considered a safe location for the summit, since it was one of the few countries on good

[58] Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil. 'The Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia: From Then to Now.' Fikra Forum. The Washington Institute for Near East Studies. 2018
https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-muslim-brotherhood-and-saudi-arabia-from-then-to-now
[59] Birol Baskan. "A new Turkey-Saudi crisis is brewing" Middle East Institute. 2019.
https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-turkey-saudi-crisis-brewing
[60] Qandil. 'The Muslim Brotherhood…' 2018
[61] Qandil. 'The Muslim Brotherhood…' 2018
[62] Badawi and al-Sayyad, "Mismatched Expectations…"

terms with both Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood."[63] One of the interesting discussions that the cable mentions is that "the Quds Force representatives insisted that they "never had any differences with the Brotherhood"[64] and had offered help, but the MB delegation told the Iranian officials that "on the issue of Egypt, we as Brotherhood are not prepared to accept any help from Iran to act against the government of Egypt."[65]

According to the MOIS cable, during the summit one of the MB representative said that "one of the most important things the groups [the MB and Iran] shared was a hatred for Saudi Arabia, "the common enemy" of the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran."[66] The MB can be a useful asset of Iran to fight the extremist Wahhabism which is the most anti-Shia form of Sunni Islam. Of course, by defeating Wahhabism Iran can also undermine its fiercest enemy, the KSA. As Helfont notes:

"…a practical alliance has developed that places each group on the same side in Middle Eastern politics. Wahhabists, conversely, are clearly on the other side of that strategic divide. Therefore, as the Wahhabists and the Muslim Brotherhood compete for influence throughout the Middle East, they will affect the region's balance of power. The more the Muslim Brotherhood is successful, the more the balance will shift in favor or Iran. The more the militantly anti-Shia Wahhabists are successful, the more Iran's influence will subside." [67]

That is why, the cable reveals, the MB delegation told the Iranians that "perhaps… the two sides could join forces against the Saudis. The best place to do that was in Yemen, where an insurgency by the Iranian-backed Houthis against the Saudi-backed Yemeni government was about to escalate into full-scale war."[68] Their suggestion was that Iran should use their influence on the Houthis and the MB does the same with the Sunni tribes to all unite against the KSA.[69]

The KSA, in response, mounted more pressure on the MB. The kingdom designated the MB as a terrorist organization. The affiliation of MB groups in Syria with Turkey made the KSA and its allies lose interest in removing Assad from power and started to normalize relations with Damascus. "The UAE and Bahrain announced they were reopening their embassies in Damascus", "the UAE pledged its support for Assad in the war," and "pro-Assad outlets in Syria have reported a warming of ties with Saudi Arabia."[70]

Erdogan, in response, also changed his position towards Assad. Turkey instead has been working with Iran and Russia in continuous Astana meetings to resolve the crisis in

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[63] James Risen. "A Secret Summit" The Intercept. 2019. https://theintercept.com/2019/11/18/iran-muslim-brotherhood-quds-force/
[64] Risen. "A Secret Summit"
[65] Badawi and al-Sayyad, "Mismatched Expectations…"
[66] Risen. "A Secret Summit"
[67] Helfont, "The Sunni Divide", 29
[68] Risen. "A Secret Summit"
[69] Risen. "A Secret Summit"
[70] Tom Allinson, Maram Shahatit.' Syria: Erdogan left out in the cold by Arab states in anti-Assad fight'. DW. 2020. https://www.dw.com/en/syria-erdogan-left-out-in-the-cold-by-arab-states-in-anti-assad-fight/a-52578130

Syria. "If [Erdogan] can justify it domestically, he may even sit at the table with Assad."[71] Hence, Turkey and the KSA completely parted ways in the Syrian civil war.

Qatar Crisis and Khashoggi Murder

As mentioned before, the MB exodos from Egypt had brough Turkey and Qatar closer tougher. Turkey opened its first military base on the Gulf soil in Qatar in 2015. "Turkey's pro-Qatar stance was troubling for Saudi Arabia and its allies"[72]. Qatar's support for the MB was even more troubling. Thus, the KSA and its allies needed to deal with Qatar. In 2017 they put a blockade on Qatar and two of many demands were the closure of the Turkish military base and ending its support for the MB. Turkey helped Qatar evade those blockades by tripling its export value to the country and providing financial support. This incident exacerbated the KSA-Turkey relations even more.

Tensions between the KSA and Turkey reached the peak when a Saudi journalist named Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Erdogan used this incident against the KSA and especially its crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman also known as MBS. Erdogan claimed that the orders to murder Khashoggi came directly from MBS and accused the kingdom's interrogations into the case misleading. A secret report entitled "Monthly Report on Saudi Arabia, Issue 24, May 2019" was prepared by the Emirates Policy Centre (EPC) and a copy was obtained by Middle East Eye (MEE). "The report is of limited circulation and intended for the top Emirati leadership. It does not appear on the think tank's website."[73] According to the report Turkey "did not provide "specific and honest" information to assist the Saudi investigation into the killing, but instead leaked "disinformation" to the media "all aimed at distorting the image of the kingdom and attempting to destroy the reputation of the crown prince".[74]

Al-Theyabi, a mouthpiece of the Saudi royal family, responded to Erdogan's accusation regarding Khashoggi's murder and wrote that "the Saudi Judiciary is looking into the case in line with the Islamic Shariah and not the secular laws followed by Turkey that is dreaming of the "Brotherhood Caliphate"[75]. But the pressure that Erdogan mounted on MBS was so troubling that Riyadh had to design a strategic plan to fight Turkey.

Turkey-KSA Cold War

According to the EPC's report, in May 2019 Riyadh gave orders "to implement the strategic plan to confront the Turkish government"[76]. The report adds that "the aim of the plan was to use "all possible tools to pressure Erdogan's government, weaken him, and

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[71] Pinar Tremblay. "Is Iran-Turkey rapprochement sustainable?" Al-Monitor. 2019. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/09/turkey-iran-experts-ask-if-rapprochement-sustainable.html

[72] Baskan. 'A new Turkey-Saudi…'

[73] David Hearst and Ragip Soylu. "EXCLUSIVE: Saudi Arabia's 'strategic plan' to take Turkey down". Middle East Eye. 2019. https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-saudi-arabias-strategic-plan-take-turkey-down

[74] Hearst and Soylu. "EXCLUSIVE: Saudi Arabia's…"

[75] Jameel Al-Theyabi. 'Turkish President's adviser Aktay: A motormouth with malicious intent'. Saudi Gazette. 2019: http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/567588

[76] Hearst and Soylu. "EXCLUSIVE: Saudi Arabia's…"

keep him busy with domestic issues in the hope that he will be brought down by the opposition, or occupy him with confronting crisis after crisis, and push him to slip up and make mistakes which the media would surely pick up on"[77].

       "The kingdom would start to target the Turkish economy and press towards the gradual termination of Saudi investment in Turkey, the gradual decrease of Saudi tourists visiting Turkey while creating alternative destinations for them, decreasing Saudi import of Turkish goods, and most importantly minimising Turkish regional role in Islamic matters,"[78] the report says. This strategy seems to be working among the leadership and the grassroots of the KSA. A video showing the governor Riyadh, Faisal bin Bandar, declining an offer of Turkish coffee surfed on social media, which triggered "a call for a boycott of Turkish products."[79]

       Ajlan al-Ajlan, chairman of the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, wrote on twitter that "as the Turkish leadership and (President Recep Tayyip) Erdogan continue their hostility and target the kingdom's leadership, we call more than ever before to boycott them... in all areas -- imports, labour and dealings with Turkish companies."[80] The KSA sometimes hinders the import of Turkish products. In 2019 the KSA authorities blocked 80 Turkish trucks transporting textile products and chemicals and 300 containers carrying fruit and vegetables from Turkey.[81]

       The KSA has also targeted Turkish tourism industry. Saudi tourists are a good source of income for Turkey as each Saudi tourist spends an average of $500 a day, "significantly higher than European visitors."[82] Riyadh began a campaign among its population to avoid Turkey as a tourist destination and claimed that Turkey is not a safe place to visit. "The Turkish tourism ministry reported Saudi visitor arrivals dropped more than 30 percent in the first five months of 2019 compared to the same period last year.[83]

       Turkish economy, however, is not the only target of the KSA. Another way the KSA is punishing Turkey with is by isolating it from the Muslim World. The Emirati report writes that "in a sign that the Saudi leadership has severed its relationship with … Erdogan and started treating him as an enemy", King Salman approved "without hesitation" a recommendation from an advisory committee not to send an official invitation to attend a high-profile Organization of Islamic Cooperation summit in Mecca."[84] Erdogan's name was added to "the list of those excluded from the summit, alongside Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani."[85]

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[77] Hearst and Soylu. "EXCLUSIVE: Saudi Arabia's…"

[78] Ibid

[79] The Daily Star. "Khashoggi fallout: Saudi holidaymakers urged to shun Turkey". 2019. https://www.thedailystar.net/middle-east/news/khashoggi-fallout-saudi-holidaymakers-urged-shun-turkey-1769839

[80] The Daily Star. "Khashoggi fallout…"

[81] Hearst and Soylu. "EXCLUSIVE: Saudi Arabia's…"

[82] The Daily Star. "Khashoggi fallout…"

[83] The Daily Star. "Khashoggi fallout…"

[84] Hearst and Soylu. "EXCLUSIVE: Saudi Arabia's…"

[85] Hearst and Soylu. "EXCLUSIVE: Saudi Arabia's…"

Finally, Kurds have been a very effective weapon that the KSA utilizes against Turkey. According to Baskan[86], the KSA alongside its two close allies, the UAE and Egypt, has established close ties with the separatist Kurdish militia in Turkey and Syria, the PKK and the YPG. The YPG is ideologically and technically tied to the PKK, a Marxist-Leninist leftist group.

According to a pro-government Turkish newspaper, Yeni Safak[87], in October 2017 the Saudi minister for Gulf affairs, Thamer al-Sabhan, who is in charge of Middle East affair, headed a joint KSA-UAE delegation and visited Raqqa under YPG control with Brett McGurk, the then US special envoy to the coalition against the Islamic State. During the meeting, Yeni Safak reports, "the two sides agreed to provide funding, training, weapons and ammo to some 30,000 terrorists of the so-called "border guards," who will be tasked with manning U.S. observations posts".In April 2018 the KSA "sent truckloads of aid to YPG/PKK via Iraq, without explaining its content or revealing if there was any ammunition or weapons inside."[88]

In another news article, Yeni Safak claims that on May 25th, 2018, "three Saudi military consultants went to Ayn al-Arab district's Harab Isk village to hold meetings with YPG/PKK terrorists. Saudi officials have set up communication checkpoints in al-Hasakah and Qamishli to recruit fighters"[89]. Later Yeni Safak reported the details of the agreement and wrote that "those who sign up will be recruited for two years and receive a monthly salary of $200."[90]

The KSA and the UAE have gone as far as dispatching their troops in the Kurdish held areas in northern Syria. "Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir confirmed in April 2018, a report published in the Wall Street Journal saying that U.S. troops in Syria could be replaced by an Arab force. Jubeir said Riyadh was in talks with Washington about such a force."[91] According to Yeni Safak, the soldiers are already "stationed with the U.S.-led coalition," and "were spotted on a battlefield in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor."[92]

The KSA has also financially contributed to reconstruct the areas taken from ISIS by the YPG. In August 2018, the KSA "pledged $100 million for stabilization projects in the territories formerly held by ISIS but now under YPG control and made the payment in October 2018."[93] According to the Turkish newspaper "these supports comes at a time "as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman continues to step up hostilities against Turkey."[94]

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[86] Baskan. "A new Turkey-Saudi crisis…'

[87] Yeni Safak, "Saudi, UAE step up support for PKK terrorists in northeast Syria", 2018. https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/saudi-uae-step-up-support-for-pkk-terrorists-in-northeast-syria-3467953

[88] Yeni Safak, "Saudi funds US-backed PKK…"

[89] Yeni Safak, "Saudi, UAE step up…"

[90] Yeni Safak, "Saudi funds US-backed PKK terror force in northern Syria" May, 29, 2018, https://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/saudi-arabia-in-talks-with-ypg-pkk-to-form-new-force-3412467

[91] Yeni Safak, "UAE, Saudi Arabia dispatch troops to east of the Euphrates in Syria" November, 20, 2018, https://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/uae-saudi-arabia-dispatch-troops-to-east-of-the-euphrates-in-syria-3466836

[92] Yeni Safak, "Saudi, UAE step up…"

[93] Baskan, "A new Turkey-Saudi…",

[94] Yeni Safak, "Saudi, UAE step up…"

Conclusion

The events between 2003 and 2011 in the Middle East might depict a short period of Shia-Sunni regional conflict. But the developments that followed from 2011 until present assure that this is not the case. State actors of the Middle East are rational like any other nation state in the world. They interact with each other based on the geopolitical realities. While Turkey, Iran, and the KSA each tries to dominate the region, other states follow suit and side with one of those states in order to balance the regional power. Turkey-Iran cooperation and KSA-Turkey rivalry are examples to refuse the narrative of the Shia-Sunni conflict.

However, there are other non-state actors in the region that once they come into the picture, they cause obfuscation. Those non-state actors are mostly sectarian group: the MB, Shia and Wahhabis. They have two different forms of conflict amongst them. One is an ancient theological and non-violent sectarianism that involves themselves only and excludes state actors. The other conflict, however, is political. It takes shape when those sectarian groups either mobilize under political parties and militia (e.g. Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, Ennahda, Al-Nour Party), or use/make alliance with states actors for mutual interest (e.g. Al-Nour Party and the KSA, Freedom and Justice Party and Turkey, MB and Qatar).

Therefore, parallel to the realpolitik of the Middle East, there is sectarian competition. Sometimes states get too involved in the sectarian conflicts that they appear as a sectarian actor. In other words, nowadays the state sponsored sectarian militias are such powerful assets that state actors rely on them to carry out their proxies. When this happens, we tend to see the entire conflict as a sectarian driven violence. In some cases, however, the sect and the state merge into one entity and it becomes a challenge to differentiate between the state and the sect, like the Shia government of Iran. That is why there is such as widespread perception that the politics of the region is based on sectarianism. The KSA supports some Sunni groups throughout the region, which might depict the KSA as a sectarian actor, but is also cooperates with the secular YPG against a Sunni country like Turkey. This proves that nation states of the Middle East are not in an all-out sectarian war, and rather they are rational actors that intend to increase their power.

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Chapter 2:

Islamism in Modern Kurdish Politics: from Sufism to Salafism

Introduction

The literature of modern Kurdish politics is widely dominated by nationalist and mostly secular movements. Given that Kurds have had an ethnic cause since early 20th century, scholars have treated Islam as a peripheral and secondary factor. They mostly relate the role of religious figures (Sufi sheikhs) in Kurdish nationalism to the late 19th and early 20th centuries only. Even in the 21st century where sectarianism has become an essential lens through which scholars see the Middle East, experts of Kurdish politics treat Kurds as if they are still nationalists and the only people in the region who have not become sectarian. Kurds are mostly homogenous Sunnis who have an ethnic and not a religious cause, it is commonly understood, hence there is no room for sectarianism among them.

The nature of Muslim political movements in Kurdish modern history can be divided over four phases. The first phase stretched roughly from around mid-19th century to early 20th century where the leaders of Sufi orders (also known as *tariqat)*, such as Nahri, Hafeed, and Piran fought for Kurdish independence. Those movements were driven by local Kurdish Islam (Sufi orders) and were nationalist movements at the same time. The second phase starts from the late 1970s until 1991; Islamists retained some components of Sufism but were also inspired by foreign Islamist ideologies, especially the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The third phase starts from 1991 until 2003; Kurdish Islamists were under heavy influence of jihadi Salafism, and many were anti-Kurdish nationalism. From 2003 to present those Islamists have turned into various ineffective groups. Instead, purist Salafists (or Salafi Da'awa which focuses more on the missionary aspect rather than Jihad) have emerged that are completely alien to the Kurdish culture and politics. Kurdish Salafists now insult and consider the Kurdish Sufi leaders of the first phase of Islamism in Kurdistan un-Islamic.

How did religious nationalist movements in the early 20th century in Iraqi Kurdistan evolve into various anti-nationalism and Salafi jihadi groups by the end of the century? Why did the role of Sufi school decline in the Kurdish politics? What accounts of the fluctuating influence of Kurdish Islamist over the course of the 20th century? Are the current Kurdish Salafists and jihadis completely independent from the early Sufi schools or is there a link between them? Most importantly, have Iraqi Kurds really evaded sectarianism in the present day?

This paper attempts to answer these questions and argues that Kurdish nationalism first emerged among religious groups because they were literate elites. Those religious movements started off with a nationalist sentiment. Over the years they moved towards Salafists under the impression of global and regional developments such as the spread of the MB, the failure of Kurdish nationalist revolution in 1975, the revival of political Islam globally (especially the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran), Arabization process of the Baath Party in 1980s, and "jihad" in Afghanistan against the Soviets until 1990.

Most importantly, I argue that the increasing rate of literacy combined with the rapid spread of mass media and technology especially contributed to theological sectarianism in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Kurdish nationalists took advantage of modern mass communications tools in the early 21st century and defied the sovereignty of

states they lived in[95]. Sectarian entrepreneurs (especially Salafists) utilized the same techniques to advocate of their sects and defied the authority of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Sectarian entrepreneurs in the KRI, Salafists in particular, take advantage of literacy to spreading their beliefs. As Abdullateef Ahmad, the most prominent Salafi leader in the KRI says, "the more literacy rate increases in Kurdistan and the more people can read, the more Salafism increases."[96] The spread of Salafism, however, has resulted in deep intracommunal division in the Kurdish society. As such, while the literate Islamic groups were the source of unity and Kurdish nationalism in early 20th century, larger regional events, literacy and mass media turned most of them into anti-Kurdish nationalism Salafists, and the source of disunity among the Kurdish society. The political sectarianism, however, does not exist in the KRI because first, the ruling secular political parties neutralized armed sectarian groups during the 1990s. Second, one of the most important sectarian actors in the KRI, Purist Salafism, has not mobilized under any political entity such as a political party of armed militia.

Literature Review

Scholars of Kurdish politics, such as Denis Natali[97] and David McDowall[98], have extensively studied the role of *tariqats* and their sheikhs in early Kurdish nationalist movements. The rise of secular Kurdish nationalism throughout the rest of the 20th century also covers the main area of modern Kurdish studies. There is not, however, as much work on Islamists of Iraqi Kurdistan and especially sectarianism among the Kurds.

Experts, such as Michael Gunter, Stephen Mansfield, Gareth Stansfield, Amberin Zaman, and Michael Rubin limit their focus to Kurdish secular and nationalist groups and primarily write about Kurds within the literature of de facto states and nationalism. Those who write about Islamism in the KRI, whether in English or Kurdish languages, such as Adel Bakawan[99], Mohammed Shareef[100], and Ali Ezzatyar, focus on the history of political Islamists. They ignore the current sectarian rivalry among Salafists, Sufis and Jihadis, which has deep political and societal ramifications in the KRI.

Except for Faleh Abdul-Jabar's *"Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues"[101]*, no expert of the Kurdish studies has explored Islam within the societal boundaries before 2003. Jabar published his book in 2002. Purist branch of Salafism only started to spread in the KRI

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[95] David Romano. "Modern communications technology in ethnic nationalist hands: The case of the Kurds." Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique 35.1 (2002): 127-149, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423902778207 Page 137-138

[96] Faisal Mohammed. 'Interview with Abdullateef Ahmad'. NRTTV. Part Three. Jan 23, 2017. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CkTAEhapR4

[97] Denise Natali. 'The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran'. Syracuse University Press (November 11, 2005)

[98] David McDowall. 'A Modern History of the Kurds'. I. B. Tauris (January 15, 1996)

[99] Adel Bakawan. 'Three Generations of Jihadism in Iraqi Kurdistan'. The French Institute of International Relations. 2017

[100] Mohammed Shareef. 'Kurdish Islamists in Iraq from the Muslim Brotherhood to the So-Called Islamic State: Continuity or Departure?' King Faisal Center for research and Islamic Studies, 2015

[101] Faleh Abdul-Jaber. 'Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues. State, religion and Social Movements in Iraq.' Saqi Books. London, 2002.

after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was also around that time when the Jihadi Salafism in the KRI started to disintegrate into various fractions. The emergence of those new forms of Islam in the KRI caused societal divisions for the first time based on religious beliefs. Although Sami Shourush and Helkot Hakim, in Abdul-Jabar's book, provide great detail on the role of Islam and especially Sufi schools in Kurdish politics and society, the book does not explore how the current rivalry among Kurdish groups in the era of a larger sectarian rift in the Middle East impact the daily lives in the KRI and the Kurdish political landscape.

There are few Kurdish writers, such as Bebak Abdullah and Idris Siwayli, who recently started to cover Salafists and political Islamists in the KRI and the schism among them. However, their descriptive writings only report the events without providing an explanation of the rise of sectarianism within a theoretical framework.

The impact of the dramatic increase of literacy rate and mass communications in the KRI after 2003 is especially important to understand the rise of Kurdish Salafism and other sectarian groups. Literacy is traditionally linked to nationalism. According to Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner nations and nationalism are biproducts of literacy and education. Anderson traces back the emergence of the sense of a "nationhood" to the colonies in the Western Hemisphere (North and Latin Americas) in the late 18th century[102]. Yet, he argues, the prerequisites of nationhood emerged in western Europe. Enlightenment challenged Christianity as the dominant force in Europe. The declining importance of religion also undermined the significance of Latin which was the official "superior" language of the Catholic Church. These unprecedented events were followed by the spread of print capitalism. Capitalist entrepreneurs published their books in vernacular languages (English, French, German and etc.) instead of a lexicon one (Latin) in order to reach as many people as possible. Each European nation was able to read and write in their own language enabling them to understand each other and strengthening the sense of cohesion among them.

Gellner, on the other hand, places the roots of nationalism in Europe and explains how this sense of nationhood turned into "nationalism". During the Industrial Revolution "modern industry requires a mobile, literate, technologically equipped population" Gellner writes, "and the nation state is the only agency capable of providing such a work force, through its support for a mass, public, compulsory and standardised education system."[103] This unprecedented national literacy was "unavailable in previous agro-literate' stages of social development."[104] Because in the modern state "literacy has to be available to the mass of the population and not simply to an elite: indeed is the development of such mass literacy that explains the rise of the modern nation state itself."[105] Education requires a unified language which leads to unifying the majority of the ethnic group. Meanwhile, minorities go through the education system provided in the language of the majority and hence get assimilated into the majority group. The result is a unified people with strong national identity leading to nationalism.

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[102] Benedict Anderson. 'Imagined community'. Verso; Revised edition (November 17, 2006) Kindle Edition
[103] Gellner, 1985, p. 29 cited in Brian Street. "Literacy and Nationalism". History of European Ideas, Vol.16, No.1-3. pp. 225-228. 1993. Page 225
[104] Ibid
[105] Ibid

The relationship between literacy and nationalism in the KRI seems to be applicable to the early phase of modern Kurdish politics. The sense of Kurdish nationalism emerged among literate elites. But as literacy increased over time in the KRI, especially after 2003 when it was coupled with mass communication and mass media, it did not result in more nationalism. Literacy and mass media rather strengthened theological sectarianism against nationalism. That is because literacy alone does not result in nationalism, it must be coupled with industrialism. In the KRI, in contrast to Europe, the government provides education to its people without there being industries to work for. With no need to learn modern working skills, the rapid increase of education in vernacular language – Kurdish – enabled large numbers of Kurds to dive more into small details of religious texts without the need to go back to imams, who once were the only literate ones among the community and knew the lexicon language of Islam, Arabic.

Methodology

I will divide this paper into four sections. In the first section I will briefly explore the role of religious movements in early Kurdish nationalist projects and examine why and how religion played such as important role in the national cause. This section briefly covers roughly from mid-19th century until the first two decades of the 20th century. From then until 1950s the role of religious movements diminishes and is replaced by secular nationalists.

In the second section I will study the reemergence of Islamist in the Kurdish political landscape from 1950s until late 1991. The third section covers from 1991 until 2003 whereas the last section is about the modern era of the KRI from 2003 until present.

I will specifically focus on the evolution of the ideology of those Islamist groups and analyze the way global and regional events impacted the change in the discourse of those groups. In the final section, which is the main and most important section, I will study the impact of literacy on the rise of sectarianism in the KRI. For data on the literacy rate in the KRI after 2003 I will rely on data provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and other public data available online.

To see how this rise of literacy has impacted sectarianism, I conducted a survey among 132 Kurds in the KRI. I asked 1) if they believe that there is sectarianism in the KRI, 2) whether it has increased or decreased since 1991, 3) the reason behind sectarianism in the KRI, 4) what types of books they read, and 5) what type of books are most available to them to read.

I also collected data from the KRG's Ministry of Culture (MOC) on the number of religious media outlets (TV and radio) that have been founded since 1991 to see how active they are in using media to spread their theology.

I interviewed the leaders of the Islamic groups in the KRI: Salahaddin Bahaaddin the Secretary General of the Islamic Union of Kurdistan (IUK), and Ali Bapir the emir of Islamic Group of Kurdistan (IGK). I also interviewed some local imams in urban and rural areas to see the social interaction among the various Islamic groups in the grassroots. I asked all of them about sectarianism in the KRI, the factors behind it, and how they each have reacted to it. I also benefitted from the data from the interviews that Kurdish media outlets have conducted with sectarian leaders.

I also looked at the impact of mass media on sectarianism in the KRI such as TV stations, newspapers, and social media. YouTube is the most used social media platforms in Iraq and the KRI[106]. It is used as an effective means of spreading sectarianism in the KRI by sectarian entrepreneurs. I examined 87 random but most popular YouTube Channels affiliated with Islamic groups in the KRI. There is no specific logic behind these numbers. I only chose those channels with significant number of subscribers and views. I counted the number of subscribers, the number of videos they have uploaded and the number of views they have. 1638

I then examined the content of 50 YouTube videos, counted the number of views, number of likes and dislikes. I then went through the comments on those videos which were 1638 comments. I analyzed each comment to see how many of them support the content of the video, how many are against, and how many are of sectarian nature. I specifically looked for some keywords which are used by sectarian groups in the KRI to discredit, degrade, and excommunicate each other such as: *taghut*, *mubtadi'*, infidel, and etc. (to see the list of these sectarian terms and their meanings see appendix 1.)

Before analyzing the data, it is important to note that the Kurdish region of Iraq will be referred to by different names throughout the paper. Before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire the Kurdish areas were referred to as Kurdistan, which encompasses the predominantly Kurdish inhabited areas of Turkey, Iraq and Syria. From the establishment of the Iraqi state until 1991 the northern part of Iraq was unofficially called Iraqi Kurdistan. From 1991 to 2003 the name changed to Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). This name was then officially recognized in the Iraqi constitution. From 2003 the KDP and PUK unified their administrations and named it "the Kurdistan Regional Government" (KRG). In each section, the Kurdish part of Iraq will be referred to according to its name during that time.

Analysis:

Section I: Islam and the Birth of Kurdish Nationalism

As mentioned before, scholars have written extensively about the role of *tariqats* in the early Kurdish nationalist movements. Instead, the focus of this section is on how the Kurdish political endeavor fall on the shoulders of religious clerics, and why they eventually vanished on the Kurdish political landscape. Most scholars attribute the rise of sheikhs to power in the early 20th century due to the demise of Kurdish municipalities during the centralization process of the Ottoman Empire.[107] Those municipalities used to hold the political power in Kurdish regions and enjoyed limited autonomous rule for centuries. Starting from the early 19th century, however, Ottomans pursued a centralization policy and removed Kurdish chieftains from power. Their absence left a power vacuum for sheikhs to fill. Thus, sheikhs were mostly the ones leading Kurdish national revolutions after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In addition to this truism, this paper adds the following factors behind the emergence of nationalism among sheikhs and eventually their increasing political role:

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[106] Statcounter. 'Social Media Stats Iraq: Mar 2019 - Mar 2020'. Link:
https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/iraq
[107] Wadie Jwaideh. The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development'
Contemporary Issues in the Middle East. 2006. Page 76

1) sheikhs were the literate elites hence Kurdish nationalism emerged among them, 2) the identity of *tariqat* goes beyond tribal identity and hence was more effective in mobilizing larger numbers of Kurdish tribes under a more encompassing identity, 3) the political competition among rival Kurdish municipalities upset the population and instead made sheikhs more favorable, 4) sheikhs' revolutions were demanding political as well as religious rights from the secular regimes of the states Kurds were divided over, hence sheikhs became even more popular among the conservative Kurdish society.

Kurdish nationalism, like in Europe, emerged among the literate elites. Those elites were mostly religious leaders such as sheikhs and imams. Traditionally religious institutions such as *Hujra* and *madrasas* were the main sources of literacy in Kurdistan. *Hujra* is a small, unofficial school within a mosque with few numbers of young students, known as *faqeh*. Madrasas are independent from the mosque and provide the same education but with larger number of students and more institutionalized form. The education curriculum in these schools was under heavy influence of Sufi doctrines. "According to al-Azzawi the Kurds adhere more strongly to the Sufi order than other ethnic groups. Two well-known Sufi orders predominate. These are the Qadiri and the Naqshabandi Orders, which have powerful and numerous centers among Iraqi Kurds"[108]

Other forms of Islam, such as Salafism, never attracted Kurds the way Sufism did. One of the main theologians who led to the emergence of Salafism was the medieval Kurdish sheikh Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328). He was born in Urfa, a Kurdish city in the southeast of modern Turkey. sheikh Ibn Taymiyyah's family was among the very few Kurds who followed the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence. Traditoinally there have been four main Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali. The majority of Kurds are Shafi'i[109]. That made Ibn Taymiyyah's ideas very unpopular among the Kurds. The followers of Hanbali school elsewhere, however, were attracted to Ibn Taymiyyah's teaching, especially Sunni Muslims of the Arab Gulf. Hanbali school was partly based on anti-Shia sentiment from the first place. The religious diversity among the Kurds, however, made Kurdistan more fertile for Sufi schools like Qadiri and Naqshibandi.

Qadiri is the oldest Sufi order among the Kurds. It originates from the teachings of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Gailani (1077-1166). His followers brought the order to Kurdistan in the 13th century.[110] Naqshibandi order, however, emerged in Kurdistan in the 19th century through teaching of the renounced Kurdish Sufi Mawlana Khalid Shahrazuri (1779–1827). By the time Naqshibandi came to Kurdistan, Qadiri had already established its base and made an alliance with kings of Baban Emirate in Sulaymaniyyah, especially with King Abdulrahman.[111] Khalid's newly brough mystic school, which later was named Khalidi, threatened the popularity of Qadiri sheikhs. Hence, they spread false rumors about Khalid and encouraged the king to assassinate him. Although the assassination attempt failed,

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[108] Sami Shourush. 'The Religious Composition of the Kurdish Society: Sufi Orders, Sects and Religion.' Page 115 in Faleh Abdul-Jaber. 'Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues. State, religion and Social Movements in Iraq.' Saqi Books. London, 2002.

[109] Salahaddin Bahaaddin. Phone interview with the author. April 4, 2020

[110] Barzan Mala Taha. "The changing history of tariqats and the social and political map of Sufism in Kurdistan (Part One)". Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center. 2017. Link: http://www.kurdistanc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5229

[111] Ibid

Khalid and his followers suffered great amount of pain at the hand of the Babani king and Qadiri sheikhs. People under the Babani rule were unsatisfied due to the heavy taxation. Thus, they associated Khalid and his school with resistance and hence Khalidi tariqat became more popular among the oppressed.[112] Soon Khalid became very popular throughout the Ottoman Empire, among the Ottoman royal family and among the Baban royal family too. King Abdul-Rahman of Baban feared that Khalid will threaten his throne and hence sent him to exile. Khalid went to Damascus and stayed there until his death in 1827.[113]

Sufi leaders sometimes appeared far more powerful than the kings because the identity of their tariqats crossed the boundaries of tribal identity.[114] Qadiri and Naqshinandi sheikhs had followers as far as Balkans, central, south and south east Asia. Additionally, they had a network of "ambassadors" called khalifas (the term means successor but in that context it means the representative). Sheikhs often spread their writings through those khalifas throughout the Ottoman and Safavid Empires.

The sheikhs came up with a form of Islam that is suitable for the Kurdish culture and society. It can be called "Kurdish Islam". It is not strictly Islamic. Some of those Sufi orders have even concealed much of their theological doctrines due to the impact of pre-Islamic religions on them.[115] The Kurdish Islam is especially in harsh opposite with radical forms of Islam such as Salafism. It is more moderate compared to Islam elsewhere in, for instance, the Arab Gulf. It does not strictly apply Islamic sharia like the punishments or hijab and burqa. Due to the religious diversity among the Kurds, their form of Islam is more tolerant.[116]

The idea of an independent Kurdish state was first recorded in the poems of a Kurdish sheikh, Sufi, and philosopher Ahmadi Xani (1650-1707) in the 17th century. However, at that time the tribal identity was in play and a cohesive Kurdish identity did not exist among the commons. As mentioned earlier, Kurdistan under the Ottoman rule consisted of various municipalities such as Baban, Soran, and Bahdinan. Those mini kingdoms spent much of their time fighting each other and expanding their territories at each other's expense. Although Mir Mohammad the Great, the king of Soran Emirate (?-1836), declared independence from the Ottoman Empire in early 19th century, his goal was not a Kurdish state, rather it was his tribe's Soran emirate which was more a multi-tribal than national entity.

Due to the corruption of the Ottoman governors and officials, especially during the 19th century on the one hand, and the wars among the Kurdish municipalities on the other, people were tired mentally and spiritually. They were looking for a savior that could prescribe political and spiritual solutions. Sheikhs appeared to be able to provide the people with these needs.[117]

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[112] Barzan Mala Taha. "The changing history of tariqats and the social and political map of Sufism in Kurdistan (Part Two)". Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center. 2017. Link: http://www.kurdistanc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5231

[113] Abdulkareem Mudarris. Yadi Mardan. Page 38, first book, cited from Taha, 'Taha. "The changing history' Part Three

[114] Barzan Mala Taha. "The changing history..,' Part One

[115] Ibid

[116] Ibid

[117] Barzan Mala Taha. "The changing history…' Part One

The social and political power of Kurdish sheikhs was further consolidated when Kurdish emirates were removed by the Ottomans, as mentioned earlier. Smaller Kurdish tribal leaders and princes then competed each other over restoring those kingdoms. Their wars brough more sorrow to the people and made sheikhs more favorable.[118]

While aghas (tribal leaders) were fighting for their tribes, Sheikh Ubeydullah Nahri (?-1883) was the first Kurdish Sufi leader to practically fight for an independent Kurdish state in the mid of 19th century.[119] Although Nahri's attempt eventually failed, other sheikhs followed his footstep and continued the national revolts such as Said Riza, Sheikh Saidi Piran, and Abdulsalam Barzani. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Sheikh Mahmoud Barzanji (1878-1956) and Sheikh Ahmad Barzani (1896-1969) later continued leading Kurdish nationalist revolutions in the newly founded Kingdom of Iraq.

Another very important factor that empowered sheikhs was that some early governments of those states that Kurds were divided over were nationalist *and* secular, such the Kemalist regime in Turkey. Hence, Kurds felt that their ethnic *and* religion was being oppressed. Kurds saw the movements initiated by sheikhs as the best channel to demand their ethnic and religious rights, and fight "infidel" and nationalist regimes.[120]

The influence of those religious movements declined within decades because first, none of those revolts succeeded. Second, the secular policies pursued by the governments in Turkey and Iraq weakened the political and social position of sheikhs. At the same time, states opened formal state schools. Since the degree obtained from those schools was important to get jobs in public sectors, people were more attracted to them than the traditional Hujras and Madrasas. With the decline of religious education sheikhs also lost their ground. Furthermore, secular ideologies such as communism and socialism came to Kurdistan and nationalists moved more towards those secular forces. Secular Kurdish nationalists exclusively led the Kurdish cause afterwards until 1970s.

Section II: The Birth of Political Islamism

After the diminishing role of tariqats on Kurdish political landscape, the only way through which Islam came back to the Kurdish political arena was the emergence of political Islamism in 1950s. Yet, due to restrictive and hostile policies of the Iraqi regimes towards Islamists, those groups in Kurdistan remained inactive until 1970s. According to Shareef, the reason behind the Islamists' abrupt activation in 1970s was that the Kurdish nationalist movement collapsed in 1975, its leader Mustafa Barzani died in 1979, which "allowed the diversification of the Kurdish political landscape into various political parties", and there was an awakening among Islamist groups in the Muslim World in general, especially the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979.[121]

In 1954 two Iraqi affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) brough the ideology of the movement to Iraqi Kurdistan. One of them was the prominent Iraqi Brotherhood

[118] Ibid

[119] Robert W. Olson. 'The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925' University of Texas Press. (1989-12-31)

[120] Barzan Mala Taha. "The changing history of tariqats and the social and political map of Sufism in Kurdistan (Part Three)". Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center. 2017. Link: http://www.kurdistanc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5229

[121] Mohammed Shareef. 'Kurdish Islamists in Iraq… p.20

leader Sheikh Muhammad Mahmoud Al-Sawaf. The other one was Amjad Zahhawi, a descendant of Babani kings, whose ancestors had migrated to Baghdad after Ottomans had removed them from power in the mid-19th century. Sawaf and Zahawi toured most of cities and towns of Iraqi Kurdistan to spread the MB ideology. They finally met with prominent Kurdish religious figures in Halabja such as Mullah Othman Abdulazeez, and Sheikh Mohammed Barzjinji. Historically Halabja has been the heart of religious movements in Kurdistan. The Kurdish Sufi sheikhs, both Qadiris and Naqshibandis, were mostly from around that area and their hubs were also located around Hawraman and Shahrazur near Halabja. Azeez and other religious figures were followers of Sufism. They were suffering from the nationalist regimes of Iraq and hence needed a political ideology to drive them towards their political needs. The political aspect of the MB was more or less compatible with their Kurdish national cause.

Abdulazeez and Barzinji accepted the ideology of the MB and spread it among their followers. Yet, their activities were limited to only civil mobilization and da'wa, as the original MB ideology demanded, and because the movement was constitutionally banned in Iraq.

Around the same time, purist Salafism also came to Kurdistan through a Kurdish Salafist leader named Hamdi Salafi (1931-2012). Hamdi was the second Kurdish Salafist theologian who is influential in the Arab world after Ibn Taiymiyyah. Hamdi, like Ibn Taymiyyah, was born in the Kurdish areas of Turkey's southeast in 1931. His biography shows how limited religious texts were in early to mid-20th century. Hamdi had to travel all the way to Damascus in 1954 to find one textbook, where he met Albani, one of the most prominent scholars of modern Wahhabism. Hamdi became a student of Albani. He then migrated to Iraqi Kurdistan in 1956 to spread his new beliefs. That was the first wave of Salafism in Iraqi Kurdistan. Like his predecessor Ibn Taymiyyah, Hamdi failed to attract many Kurds. As a part of Iraqi regimes' anti-Salafism policy, Hamdi was pressured and hence he joined Kurdish revolution led by Mustafa Barzani. Both, Salafism and the MB remained inactive until 1970s.

The MB, on the other hand, secretly recruited more Kurdish youth in schools and universities in 1970s. Salahaddin Bahaaddin and Siddiq Abdulazeez, the younger brother of Othman Abdulazeez, were each leading different youth movements of the MB in Iraqi Kurdistan. Bahaadin's branch was known as the "First MB Wing" whereas Siddiq's group was referred to as the "Second MB Wing". The reason that there were various MB groups in Iraqi Kurdistan was that the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood (IOMB) had not officially appointed any murshid (guide) for Iraqi Kurdistan. The MB also had not officially opened its Iraqi branch. In 1974 the IOMB ordered the Iraqi MB affiliates to halt any activity due to the Baath Party's hostile treatments of the Brotherhood. Only Bahaaddin followed the order. Others, such as Abdulazeez brorthers and Barzinji, disobeyed and continued their activities. In 1978 Barzjinji went as far as founding a secret Islamist group called Kurdistan Islamic League Movement (KILM).

Abdulazeez brothers and Barzinji preferred to take advantage of the developments that created a friendly environment for the growth of their movements in Iraqi Kurdistan. In 1975, as a result of Algerian Accord, the Kurdish nationalist movement under Mustafa Barzani collapsed. This left a vacuum that Islamists could fill. With the death of Barzani in 1979, the Kurdish political landscape diversified more, and Islamists grew further.[122]

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[122] Shareef. Kurdish Islamists in Iraq… p.20

In early 1980s the Baath pressure increased on Kurdish areas. Bahaaddin and his followers escaped to Iran and remained there for ten years. In 1985 Bahaaddin visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and met with the IOMB leaders. During that meeting, the IOMB appointed Bahaaddin as the murshid of the MB Kurds in diaspora in Iran. Siddiq Abdulazeez remained in Halabja and mobilized the youth for the MB.

Barzjinji followed Bahaaddin to Iran and officially announced his KILM in 1984. The KILM resorted to the mountains and took up arms against the Iraqi Baath regime. They published the first Kurdish Islamic magazine in the mountains in 1984 named "Asoy Islam" (the Horizon of Islam). In the same year, the Bahaaddin's MB branch in Iran published a sessional magazine called "Bangi Ghariban" (Nida Al-Ghuraba, The Call of Strangers) in Kurdish, Arabic and Persian.[123] The rest of Kurdish MB who had remained in Iraqi Kurdistan agreed among themselves to appoint Othman Abdulazeez as the leader of the Iraqi MB branch.

Around that time the first wave of Salafi jihadi hit Kurdistan. Many Egyptians who came to Iraqi Kurdistan to find jobs, spread the audio cassettes of Abdullah Azzam. Few Kurdish youths were inspired by Azzam's jihadi ideas, such as Fatih Krekar (Mullah Krekar) in Sulaymanyah, Amin Pirdawood Xoshnaw, Walid Yunus (nicknamed Abu Khubaib who was an ethnic Turkoman), and Ali Wali in Erbil.[124] They secretly trained some youths on weapons. In 1985 they went to Afghanistan to assist their Mujahedeen brothers against the Soviets.[125]

Abdulazeez and his brothers, on the other hand, along with Siddiq, escaped to Iran in 1987 after a failed demonstration against the Baath party in Halabja. In Iran, Barzinji encouraged Abdulazeez to join his KILM and take up arms. They then together founded the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) in 1987 under the leadership of Othman Abdulazeez. For the first time, a Kurdish Islamist groups could recruit 1200 armed men.

While in Iran, Kurdish Islamists published various newspapers and magazines in Kurdish, Arabic, Persian and English such as An-Nafeer, Dangi Bawar (The Voice of Faith), Gizing (Dawn), Bangi Haq (The True Call), Halabja, Alshuhadaa (The Martyrs) Bangawaz (The Call), Al-Saf (The Group), Mashxal (Torch), Raparin (Revolution), Bangi Rasti (The Call of Truth).[126] Although they attempted to open a radio station as well but they failed.[127]

As Siwayli observes, the founding fathers of the IMK came from very diverse ideological backgrounds. Most of them were religious imams who had been teaching religion in mosques their entire life and had no experience in politics and militia business.[128] The only factors that had brought them together were their Islamic background, their enmity towards the central government in Baghdad, and their demands for Kurdish

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[123] Bahaaddin Ahmad. "Islamic Media in Kurdistan Region between Da'awa and Politics". Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center. Islamic Studies. 2018. Translated from Kurdish by the researcher. Link http://www.kurdistanc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5228
[124] Idris Siwayli. The Change of Salafi Rhetoric Among Jihadi Groups in Kurdistan Region. Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center. Islamic Studies. 2018 page 4-5. Translated from Kurdish.
[125] Ibid
[126] Ahmad. "Islamic Media in Kurdistan Region…"
[127] Ibid
[128] Siwayli, The Change of Salafi Rhetoric…

rights. In other words, they were religious superficially but nationalist at the essence. "Many of the Iraqi Kurdish members were both Islamists and Kurdish nationalists at the same time – essentially, they were religious nationalists"[129] Shareef writes. "They were enthusiastic participants in the Kurdish revolt but subscribed to an Islamic ideology. They strongly believed that only true Islam could protect Kurdistan and that the two were intertwined."[130]

The IMK resorted to violence partly because they were influenced by the jihadi ideology of Sayed Qutb[131], the radical ideologue of the MB. They already had enough reasons to take up arms against the atrocities of the Baath regime, some atrocities that the IOMB never condemned. The IOMB did not want to provoke the nationalist Arab leaders not to jeopardize the movement further. Additionally, the armed activities of the IMK were incompatible with the principles upon which Hassan Al-Banna had founded the MB.

In 1987 Bahaaddin went to the UAE to participate in an IOMB conference. The IOMB leadership sent Othman a letter via Bahaaddin asking him to give up on the armed struggle. "Othman Abdul-Aziz read the letter out loud in front of the members of his political office, then ripped the first line apart that began with "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful", and threw the rest to his feet stating: "I am a jihadist Muslim Kurd. I am a free man; they cannot give me orders"[132]

The IMK felt the lack of support for the Kurdish cause from the MB and hence decided to separate from them. According to Siddiq Abdulazeez, "the letter changed everything" because it discouraged large numbers of the Kurdish MB from supporting the IMK.[133] Even Siddiq himself defected from his brother and remained within Bahaaddin's camp. The negative impact of that letter on the IMK's durability appeared a decade later.

The IMK had found another potential ally against Saddam Hussein, the Shia Iran. Islamic Revolution of Iran, unlike the Sunni MB, encouraged and provided direct support to the Kurdish Islamists against Saddam Hussein during the eight-year war between the two countries in 1980s. In fact, the IMK was not the only Kurdish Islamist group supported by Iran. There were other small and ineffective groups such as Kurdish Islamic Army, Islamic Fayli Kurdish Organization, Hezbollah of Kurdistan in Iraq, Kurdistan Mujahidin Movement. All of these groups were born in Iran and were supported, armed and trained by the Islamic Revolution's Quds force. As Shareef writes, "most of them were creations of the Iranian intelligence service."[134] This is a strong indication that Kurdish Islamists at that time were not sectarian or at least anti-Shia.

In contrast to Iran's rapprochement to Kurdish Islamists, Baath party gave Salafists limited freedom in 1980s, Salafi theology was extremely anti-Shia and hence could be used as an instrument against Iranians. Purist Salafists in south Iraq started to advocate for Salafism. In general Salafists can be classified over two groups; purists or scientific (those whose works focus on missionary projects and refrain from politics), and Jihadis (those

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[129] Shareef. "Kurdish Islamists in Iraq…" p.21

[130] Shareef. "Kurdish Islamists in Iraq…" p.24

[131] Shareef. "Kurdish Islamists in Iraq…" p.20-22 and, Bakawan," Three Generations of Jihadism…" p.9

[132] Bakawan, "Three Generations of Jihadism…" p.9-10

[133] Salar Mahmoud. "The Letter that changed the current of Islamism in Kurdistan." Diplomatic Magazine. 2018. Link: http://diplomaticmagazine.net/religion/180

[134] Shareef. "Kurdish Islamists in Iraq…" p.26

who focus on political change through armed struggle). In 1987 a young Kurds, named Abdullateed Ahmad, originally from Kurdistan's Raniyah, got accepted by Al-Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad. He met Arab purist Salafists and was influenced by their ideas. Ahmad translated some Salafi Arabic booklets to Kurdish. His efforts did not bear any worth-mentioning fruit.

Jihadi Salafism, however, was gaining more supporters among the Kurds. Two Arabs Qutbists were within the IMK the rankings, named Abdulshaheed and Abdulbaree. They encouraged Kurds to immigrate to Afghanistan for jihad.[135] Krekar and his Kurdish Mujahideen fellows had opened a base in Peshawar, Pakistan, called Bayt al-Akrad (The House of Kurds). They recruited and trained Kurdish mujahideen before sending then to Afghanistan. Once they won the war against the Soviets, Kurdish mujahideen came back from Afghanistan and joined the IMK in 1989.[136] However, they were not alone; they brough with them a number of foreign national mujahideen from other counties who were called by local Kurds "Afghan Arabs". Krekar became a member of IMK's Shura (the consultative council).

Krekar had brought some books from Pakistan and made them the official curriculum among the IMK members. Many of those books were too extreme and alien to IMK's original Kurdish/Islamist program. The ideology of those new Kurdish mujahideen was to establish a Caliphate and not a Kurdish state. In fact, they believed that nation states were the creation of the "infidel West" to disintegrate the Muslim Ummah.[137] They also demanded implementing Sharia law, and anyone who did not abide by Sharia was an infidel according to them. For the first time Kurdish Islamists were more loyal to a non-Kurdish cause and started to excommunicate fellow Kurds. The IMK leadership pressured Krekar to denounce those extreme ideologies. Krekar defected from the IMK under the leadership's pressure and founded his own militia named Islamic Group in Iraqi Kurdistan (IGIK) in 1990.[138] Afterwards, Salafi Jihadism dramatically increased in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Overall, when compared to the secular nationalist movements, the Kurdish Islamists were not that strong and popular. They never attracted Kurdish people the way nationalist groups did. "A major contributing factor to their relative unpopularity is the religious association of most Iraqi Kurds with Sunni Islam, since most Kurds are Muslims and the official Iraqi national religion is Islam; the Kurdish liberation movement was a nationalist one and not a struggle to achieve sectarian or religious rights, as the Kurds had no grievances at the religious or sectarian levels."[139] Nevertheless, Islamic groups in Kurdistan before 1991 were overall united and did not have many significant schism.

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[135] Idris Siwayli. "The Change of Salafi Rhetoric Among Jihadi Groups in Kurdistan Region." Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center. Islamic Studies. 2018. P.6
[136] Idris Siwayli. "The Change of Salafi Rhetoric…" p.4-6
[137] Ibid
[138] Ibid
[139] Shareef. "Kurdish Islamists in Iraq…" p.5

Section III

1991-2003: The demise of political Islamism

In 1991 Kurds rose against the Baath regime, expelled the Iraqi army and took control over their claimed territories. In a popular election held in 1992 the two Kurdish dominant secular parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), won the majority of votes. The IMK won only 5% of the votes and did not pass the 7% parliamentary entry threshold. Thus, the KDP and PUK split power between themselves and alienated the IMK from the political process.

The very first breakup after 1991 occurred among the MB. Bahaaddin and Siddiq Abdulazeez separated their paths again. Siddiq Abdulazeez left the MB rankings and established an independent political party in 1992 called Islamic Revolutionary Movement (Bizutnaway Raparini Kurdistan). Bahaaddin established an unarmed political party in 1994 called the Islamic Union of Kurdistan (IUK).

Krekar's colleagues from Afghanistan, Amin Pirdawd Xoshnaw, established Islamic Jihadi Group in Iraqi Kurdistan (IJGIK) in 1991.[140] The IMK, on the other hand, initially accepted the results of the elections. It started the first Kurdish Islamist TV in May 1991.[141]

Some hawkish members of the IMK, who had also come under the influence of jihadi Salafism, were not satisfied with the pragmatic actions of the IMK leadership and urged to fight the secular Kurdish parties. In December 1993 clashes erupted between the IMK and PUK. This war also dragged the purist Salafists into the quagmire.

In 1990s Kurdish Salafists like Abdullateef Ahmad had to leave southern Iraq and came back to Kurdistan. That is because Saddam Hussein got into a war with the Gulf countries (who are the main sponsors of Salafism) therefore his relationship with Salafism was also deteriorated. At the same time, then the vice-president of Iraq, Ezzat Ibrahim al-Douri, was influenced by Sufism and pleaded allegiance to the Kurdish Sufi sheikhs of Qadiri. These two factors played a crucial role in convincing Hussein to break alliance with Salafists and crush them.[142] Few more purist Salafists also emerged in Sulaymaniyah in 1990s besides Abdullateef Ahmad, such as mala Omar Chinginyani. Although Ahmad refrained from violence, Chinginyani practically partook in the civil war.

According to Ahmad, many factors led to the involvement of Chinginyani in the IMK-PUK.[143] First, purist Salafists had sympathy for the jihadi Salafists. There was not a fine line between the two. Some of the purist Salafists such as Chinginyani were partially influenced by Qutb and other jihadi Salafists. Second, some of the PUK leaders were atheists and were extremely against Islam. Hence, purists Salafists had an anti-PUK sentiment. Third, due to the militarized society of Iraq at that time, guns could be found in every household, including Chinginyani's mosque. When the PUK attacked his mosque, Chinginyani and his students confronted them with weapons. Two of them were killed, and

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[140] Siwayli. The Change of Salafi Rhetoric… p. 4-5

[141] Bahaaddin Ahmad. "Islamic Media in Kurdistan…"

[142] Faisal Mohammed. "Interview with Abdullateef Ahmad" NRTTV. Part Two. Jan 15, 2017. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CScI8lIjZM

[143] Ibid

Chinginyani managed to escape. Abdullateef Ahmad fled to Syria, then Sudan, and finally resided in Yemen. While in Yemen, he became a student of Sheikh Muqbil bin Hadi Al-Wadi'i (1933–2001) and learned Salafism in Dammaj school.[144]

The IMK lost the war and its political and social influence. Many of its leaders were killed. The remaining fractions took different paths. Some of them decided to leave jihad and militant tactics and focus on education and media.[145] They established the Center of Islamic Studies in Halabja and pressed two monthly magazines called "Liwa Sharia" (The Army of Sharia) and "Ikhbar Al-Muslimeen fi Al-Alam" (The News of Muslims in the World). The center also translated and published books of foreign jihadi Salafi imams and opened courses for youths.[146]

Islamists seemed to be living in an ideological crisis. The breakdown that they experienced by the end of the 1990s was never seen before among neither Islamists themselves nor seculars. Different Islamic figures and small group would establish their own jihadi and change fronts back and forth. Hassan Sofi, a former IMK members, established Kurdish Hamas in 1998. Another mujahid named Abu Baseer established Tawhid Group in Erbil. These groups declared that their political goal was to reestablish the Islamic caliphate.[147] They started recruiting Iraqi Arabs and Muslims from outside of Iraq.[148] Since their goal was not pragmatic within the Kurdish political realities, they could not handle the pressure from KDP and PUK on one hand and the IMK on the other, so they joined Krekar's forces.

In 1999 IMK united with a small Islamic movement called Islamic Renaissance Movement (Bizutnaway Nahdhay Islami) and changed its name to Islamic Unity Movement, IUM (Bizutnaway Yakbooni Islami). On May 30th, 2001 a group defected from the IUM under Ali Bapir and established the Islamic Group of Kurdistan (IGK). Three months later, another group under Abu Abdullah Shafi'i defected from the IMK and established Jund Al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam). On December 10th, 2001 Kreker joined Jund Al-Islam, became its leader, and changed the name of the group to Ansar Al-Islam. IUM then changed its name back to the IMK.

Ansar Al-Islam not only was against Kurdish nationalism, but for the first time stood against tariqat leaders who 100 years before were the leaders of Kurdish communities. While sheikhs were seen as the national and religious saviors in early 20th century, by the end of the century Kurdish Islamists were seeing them as un-Islamic and insulted their tombs. In mid-July 2002 Ansar Al-Islam militants attacked the tombs of

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[144] Bebak Abdullah. "The Impact of Madkhalism on Salafism in Kurdistan." History of Kurd. 2016. Link: http://www.historyofkurd.com/2016/08/01/%DA%95%DB%95%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%95%D9%88%DB%95%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%95%D8%AF%D8%AE%DB%95%D9%84%DB%8C-%D9%84%DB%95-%D8%B3%DB%95%D8%B1-%DA%95%DB%95%D9%88%D8%AA%DB%8C/

[145] Aram Mahmoud Ahmad. "Islamists of Kurdistan from the dream of opposition to internal rivalry." Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center. Translated from Kurdish by the researcher. Link: http://www.kurdistanc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5459

[146] Siwayli. "The Change of Salafi Rhetoric…"

[147] Siwayli. "The Change of Salafi Rhetoric…"

[148] Siwayli. "The Change of Salafi Rhetoric…" p.8

Naqshibandi sheikhs in Tawela, near Halabja, destroyed them, opened the graves, and took the remnants of the bodies.[149] They filmed all these sickening images and spread the tapes, sparking an outcry throughout Kurdistan, especially among Sufi groups.

Ansar Al-Islam, which retained close cooperation with the IGK, established an Islamic emirate in Hawraman area, near Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran border, and strictly imposed the Sharia law on the locals. The group had become a challenge to the PUK administration with its occasional partisan attacks. In 2003, prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the PUK cooperated with the U.S. against Ansar Al-Islam and the IGK. Turkey had denied providing its land as a launching base against the Baath regime. Therefore, the US needed to prepare Kurdistan as its northern frontier towards the south. The first step was to clean the area from any potential opposition voice. On March 21, 2001, which coincides with Newroz, the Kurdish new year, the U.S. destroyers launched 40 tomahawks from the Mediterranean Sea towards the IGK bases in Hawraman killing more than 100 armed men in their sleep.[150]

On March 28th, 40 U.S. personnel comprised of U.S. Special Forces and CIA paramilitary officers alongside 1000 PUK fighters launched an operation against some 800 Ansar Al-Islam fighters in a little-known military operation called "Operation Viking Hammer"[151]. The first phase of the attack consisted of hitting the vulnerable Ansar Al-Islam bases located on the top of Hawraman mountains with 64 Tomahawk cruise missiles. The ground forces then attacked Ansar fighter killing 200 of them. The rest were either captured, retreated to the remote mountains, or fled to Iran. "In September 2002, Mullah Krekar entered Iran but was arrested by the Iranian authorities and sent to Holland where he was arrested upon arrival in Amsterdam and was later sent to Norway."[152]

While this marks the end of political Islamism in Kurdistan region as effective actors, the golden era of purist Salafists begins in 2003. The effective presence of political Islamists in Iraqi Kurdistan left a vacuum and purist Salafists filled it. But 2003-present, is also the era of an increasing degree of sectarian division among the Iraqi Kurdish Muslims groups threatening Kurdish societal cohesion.

Section IV

2003-present: the rise of literacy and sectarianism

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 marks a new and different era in the history of Kurdistan: politically, economically, and socially. The region gained federal status in the new Iraqi constitution and was officially recognized as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The KDP and PUK unified their two separate administrations in Erbil and Suleymaniya and established the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with its capital in Erbil.

The KRI was opened towards the outside world. For the first time Cellphone services and WiFi became available to almost everyone in the region. While people had

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[149] Human Rights Watch. "Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan. Background on the Crisis in Iraq." Link: https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/mena/ansarbk020503.htm

[150] Linda Robinson. 'Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces'. PublicAffairs; New York (2005) p.307

[151] Ibid

[152] Nader Entessar. Uneasy Neighbors: Iran and the Kurdish Regional Government. Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies Vol. 41, No. 2, Winter 2018. P. 77

access to only few local TV channels during 1990s, every house started to mount satellite dishes over their rooftops. They now had hundreds of global channels to watch and be aware of the world news. The KRI became financially independent from Baghdad and exported its oil through Turkey in 2012 without returning to the federal government. Modern malls, international airports, hospitals and brand-new highways were built. The KRG especially focused on enhancing the education system and so far, has spent billions of petrodollars on its reformation. The impact of enhanced education on the emergence of sectarianism in the KRI is noticeable now.

Since 2008, the KRG "has undertaken an ambitious reform of the kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) education system. This has included developing a more rigorous curriculum, compulsory education through grade 9, national exams in grades 9 and 12, and requiring that all new teachers hold a bachelor's degree."[153]

According to a 2018 report on education system in the KRI prepared by RAND "in 2011–12, there were 356 kindergarten schools, 4,598 basic schools, 816 secondary schools, and 32 secondary-level vocational schools. Altogether, these schools served some 1.5 million students, an increase from 1.1 million in 2004–05 (Figure 1), and were taught by 98,000 teachers, an increase from 60,000 in 2004–05. Th e average student-teacher ratio is now about 15 to 1."[154]
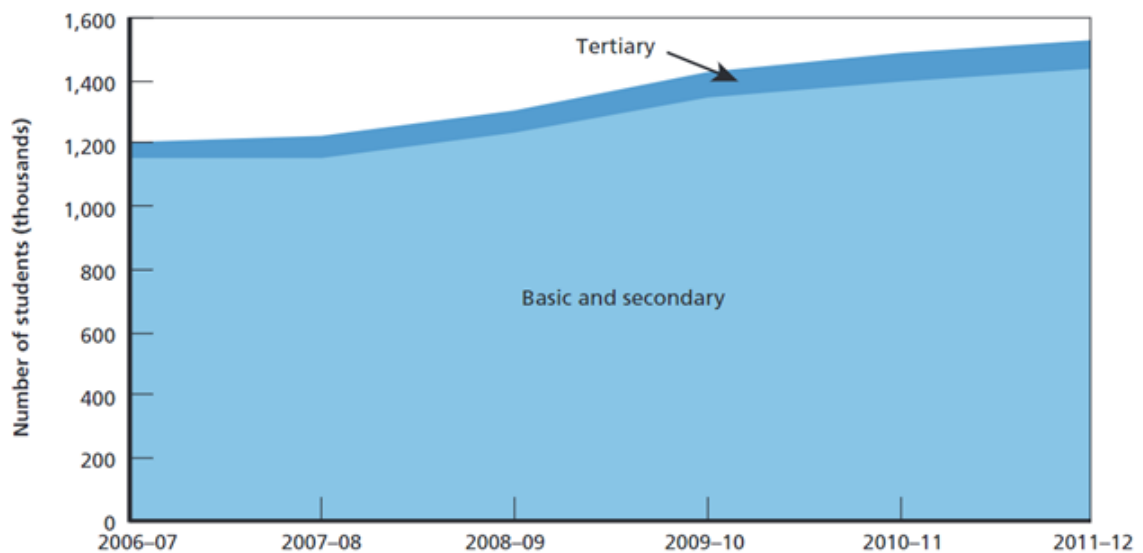
SOURCES: MoE and MOHESR.

RAND RR960-1.2

Figure 1. Student Enrollment, by Education Lebel, 2007-2012[155]

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[153] Vernez, Georges, Shelly Culbertson, Louay Constant, and Rita Karam, Initiatives to Improve Quality of Education in the Kurdistan Region — Iraq: Administration, School Monitoring, Private School Policies, and Teacher Training. Kurdistan Regional Government, 2016. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR960.html.
[154] Ibid p.5
[155] Ibid

In 2013 the KRG allocated 16% of its budget for the education and higher education sectors.[156] "Already large in size, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has become largest KRG Ministry, employing 24% of the Region's workforce."[157] From 2006 to 2013 private schools and universities invested $668 million into 16 Kurdistan Board of Investment licensed education projects[158] (table 1).

Budget Share	16%
Total Investment (2006-2013)	$668 million
Primary and Secondary Schools	2,641
Primary and Secondary Enrollment	1.7 million
Public Universities	13
University Students (2013)	115,000

Table 1 (source: The Investment in Group)[159]

According to the 2018 IOM report the overall literacy rate in the KRI is 79%. "In the younger age groups (6–17 years old), literacy rates are much higher than for the overall population at large and particularly for the older age groups: nearly 90% claim to read and write as compared to a literacy rate between 26% and 45% for the population aged 55 years and above"[160] (Table 2).

%		Can read (all)	Can read (only non-graduates)	Can write (all)	Can write (only non-graduates)
Governorate	Duhok	77.2	52.0	76.0	49.5
	Erbil	80.8	56.1	80.0	54.1
	Sulaymaniyah	79.2	56.7	78.1	54.4
Location Type	rural	71.8	51.8	70.9	50.4
	urban	80.9	56.4	79.8	53.9
Sex	Female	72.0	46.4	70.8	44.2
	Male	86.7	67.0	85.8	64.7
Age	0-14	87.2	82.0	86.9	81.5
	15-17	95.3	79.7	95.2	79.1
	18-24	93.9	64.5	93.7	63.2
	25-34	84.0	50.2	82.8	46.6
	35-44	75.0	45.2	73.0	40.9
	45-54	68.3	34.8	66.3	30.6
	55-64	44.9	19.5	42.9	16.6
	65+	28.3	14.1	26.1	11.5
Household income (Iraqi Dinar)	Less than 500,000	73.6	50.6	72.3	48.3
	500,000 - 749,000	79.7	56.4	78.6	54.1
	750,000 - 999,000	82.6	59.3	81.7	57.1
	1,000,000 or above	84.9	59.4	84.1	57.4
Total non-camp KRI		79.3	55.4	78.3	53.1
IDP	Non-camp	81.2	58.8	79.9	56.0
	Camp	64.8	39.9	64.0	38.6

Table 2. Literacy rate (age 6 and above) in the KRI in 2018[161]

[156] Invest in Group. "Knowledge is Power: Education". 2013. Link: https://investingroup.org/review/246/knowledge-is-power-education-kurdistan/
[157] Ibid
[158] Ibid
[159] Ibid
[160] The IOM. "KRI Demographic Survey" p.34
[161] The IOM. "KRI Demographic Survey"

The increasing rate of education and literacy, however, did not translate into industrialization in the KRI, nor it led to the rise of scientific researches and innovations among its population. There are very limited number of factories and industries that can encourage the people to equip themselves with modern knowledge and working skills. According to the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) there are 3714 factories in the KRI. Due to the war on ISIS and the financial crisis that the KRI experienced in 2014, 2272 of those factories stopped working which is equivalent to 61% of the total number. Their closure only caused lying off 8835 employees. That means each factory had hired less than 4 people. The MTI has dedicated 2500 acre of land in Erbil for 500 factories, but there is no infrastructure and services such as water and electricity for them to operate. According to the MTI 75% of those factories are just unfinished buildings with zero production.

According to a 2012 Kurdistan Region Labor Force Survey, "among the adult population aged 15 and older, participation of the adult population in the labor force is low, at about 38 percent… About half of the employed population work for the government. Thirteen percent of employed persons work in construction, 11 percent in wholesale and retail trade, 6 percent in agriculture, 6 percent in transport and communications, and 1 percent in manufacturing."[162]

With no factories to work for, no need to learn work skills, and very low number of scientific books and sources compared to religious ones, according to our survey almost half (48%) of people in the KRI read religious books. Only 24% read scientific books, 20% read other types of books and 8% don't read (Chart 1). Religious groups such as Salafists and Islamists actively import, translate, and publish religious books in Kurdish. About 82% of the survey participants believed that it has become easier to have access to religious books in Kurdish since 1991, only 4% believed that it has become more difficult.
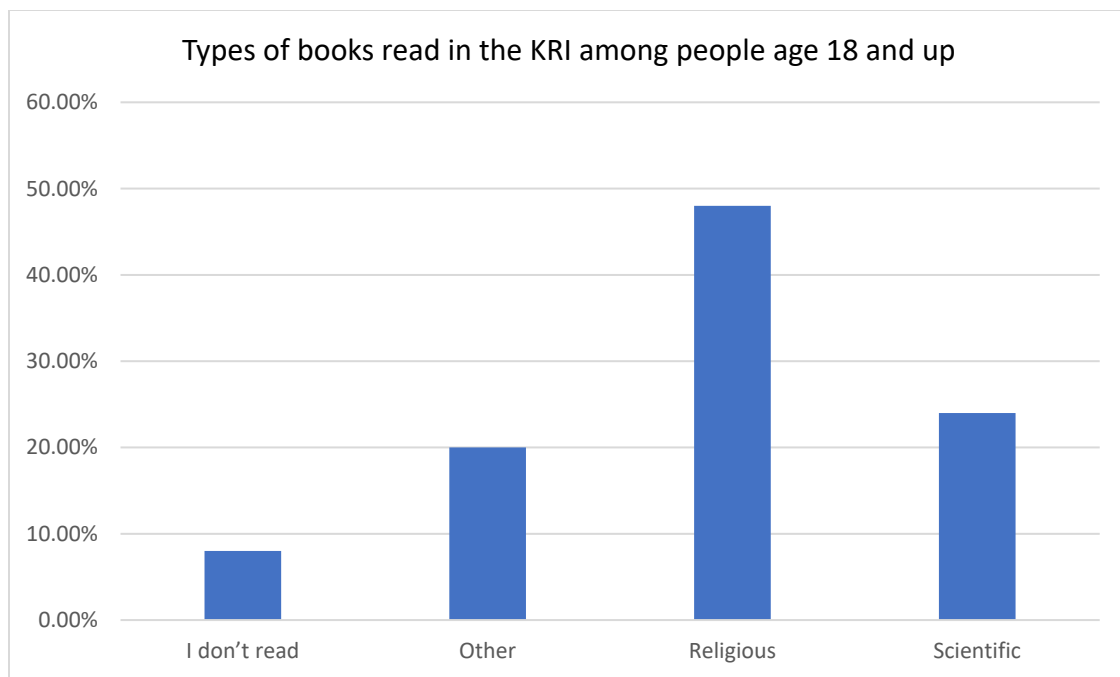

Chart 1. Types of books read among the KRI population

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[162] Vernez, "Initiatives to Improve Quality of Education in…" p.4

Reading religious books has increased sectarianism in the KRI. Nearly 80% of the survey participants believe that there is sectarianism in the KRI and only 7% disagree (Chart 2). Among the participants 78% themselves have witnessed an intense sectarian quarrel between sectarian actors in the KRI. And 47% of them say that they themselves have hated a fellow Kurd to due to their sectarian identity. The number of those Kurds who hated other Kurds for their sectarian identity is highest among those who read religious books. Those who do not read or read non-religious books are most likely to respond that they never hated anyone over sectarian identity (Chart 3).
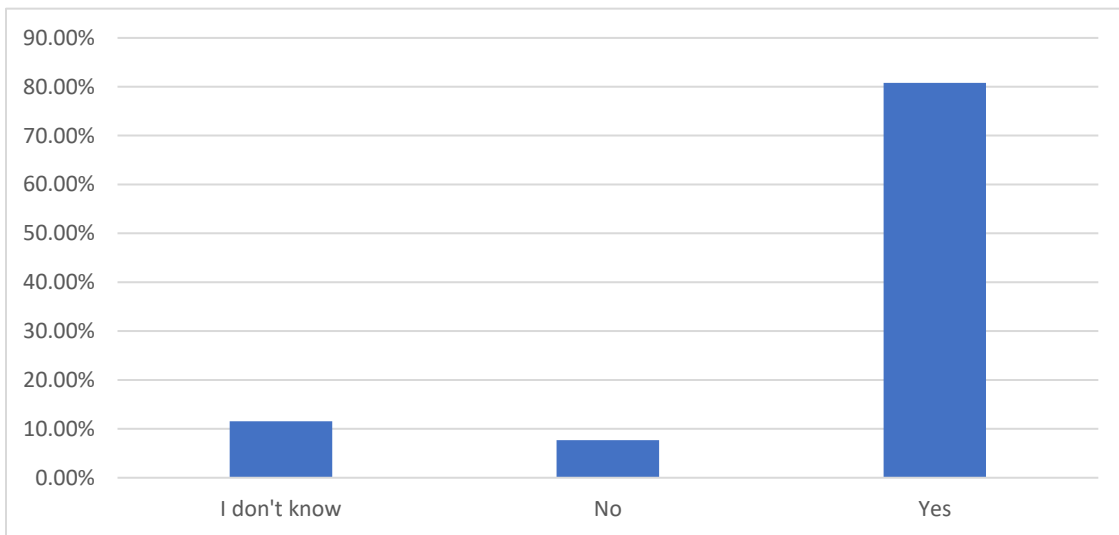

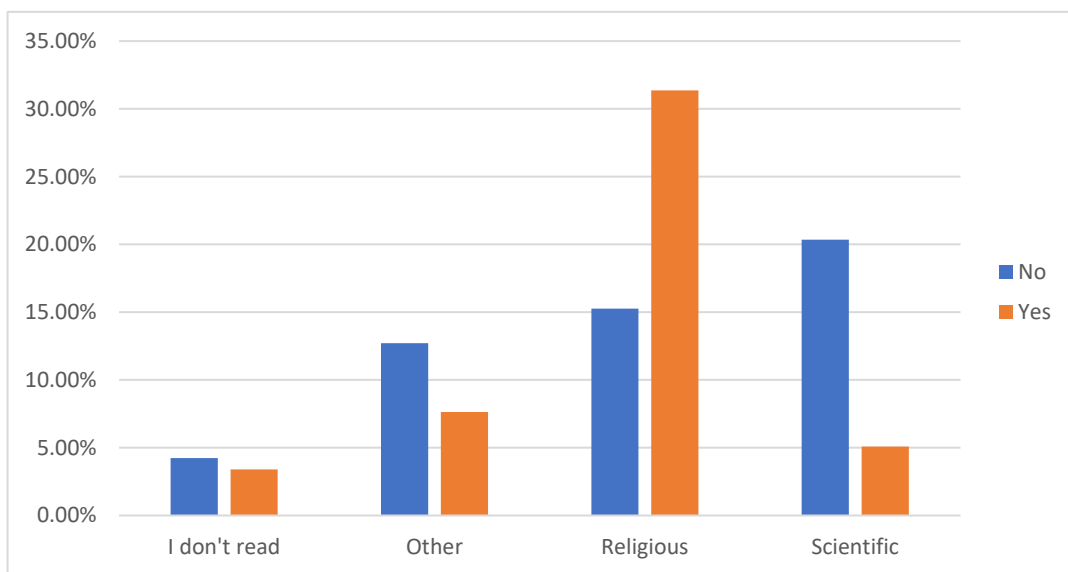Chart 2. Do you think there is sectarianism in the KRI?

Chart 3. Sectarian hatred among KRI people based on the types of books they read. (Question asked: Have you hated any KRI citizen for their sectarian identity?)

When asked what the reason behind sectarianism in the KRI is, 35% responded that it is due to the increase of literacy rate, 35% also believed that it is the regional sectarian powers such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabi (KSA) and Iran. Nevertheless, 20% attribute sectarianism to domestic factors and believe that it is because Kurds are unsatisfied with the traditional form of Islam in Kurdistan. 9% believe that none of these are factors behind sectarianism (Chart 4).
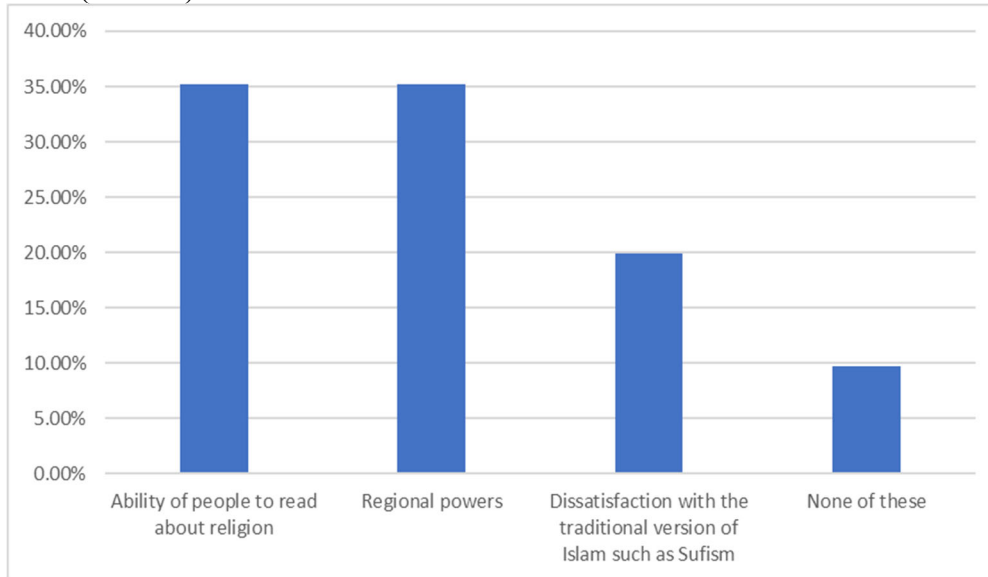

Chart 4. What are the factors behind sectarianism in the KRI?

Despite the increase of sectarianism, which will be elaborated in detail in the next sections, Kurdish national identity remains the strongest. When asked which identity they define themselves with, 72% chose Kurdish identity. Salafi came the second after Kurdish national identity with 11%, 8% chose MB identity, and 7% chose "other". However, when asked how important their sectarian identity is, the majority, 40% responded that their sectarian identity is "very important", and nearly 30% said that it is "important". While 9% responded that it is somehow important, 20% thought that their sectarian identity is not important at all (Chart 5).
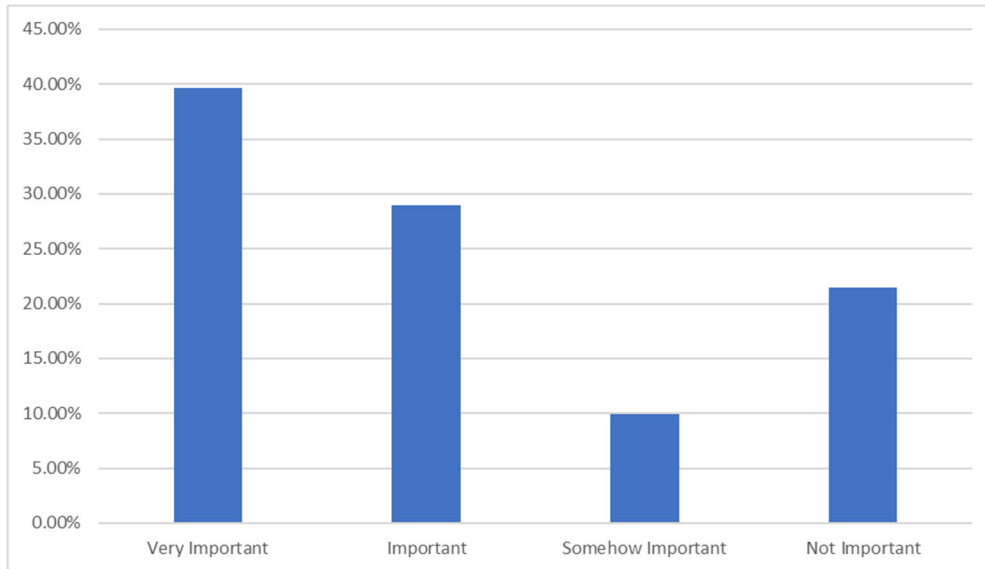
Chart 5. How important is your sectarian identity for you?

Sectarian identity is most important among those with higher education level, such as college graduates, then among those who have masters and PhD. Whereas sectarian identity seems to be least important among those who have finished high school but not gotten into college (Chart 6).
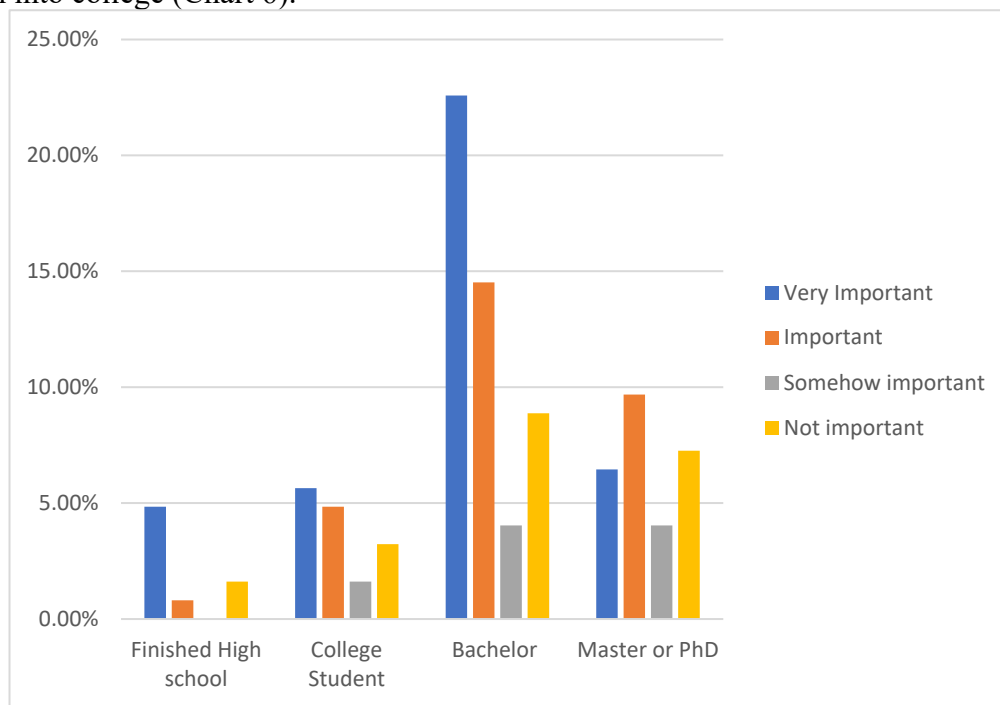

Chart 6. Importance of sectarian identity among KRI population based on their education level.

When looked at the importance of sectarian identity from the "age" perspective, the younger generation who are born after 1991 responded "very important", however, the

response "not important" is significantly higher among the older generation between age 29 and 65 (Chart 7).
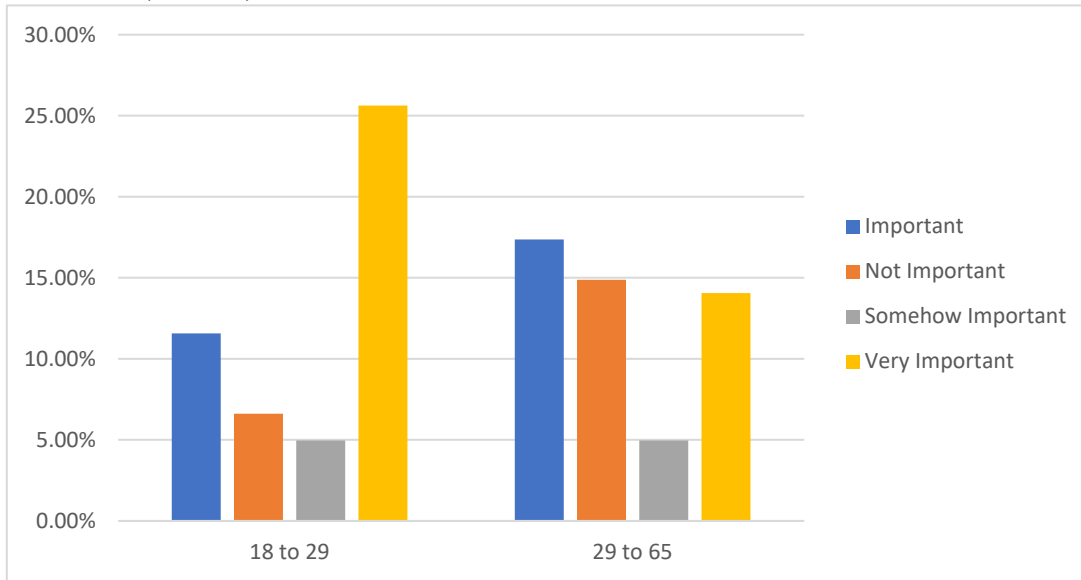

Chart 7. Importance of sectarian identity among KRI population based on their age group

Based on these data there is a relationship between the rate of education and the sectarian sentiment. The literacy rate among the younger generation who are born after 1991 is higher, so is the sectarian sentiment and the importance of sectarian identity. As shown above, sectarian identity is also more important among those who are graduates and postgraduates. Finally, most of those who read religious books have hatred towards other sectarian groups.

Islamic groups in the KRI, except of purist Salafists, also existed before 1991 and yet they did not have this schism. Now that purist Salafists have arrived in the KRI and their numbers are increasing every day, so has the level of sectarianism. That is because, according to Ahmad, people read about religious matters themselves and do not need imams to explain Islam to them.[163] And since Salafism is based on "reforming Islam" and "correcting" other Muslims, they tend to be the ones who spark quarrels and get into more arguments than other Muslim groups. Furthermore, there is sectarianism not only between purist Salafists and the rest of the Muslims in the KRI, but also among purist Salafists themselves. According to Bahaaddin, young Salafists have limited literacy, they know little about religion, yet they think: "what is the difference between me and Imam Shafi'i, we both can read and we both speak Arabic, so why should I follow him while I can read the sources myself?!".[164]

The rise of purist Salafism in the KRI

Salafi imams like Abdullateef Ahmad and Omar Chinginyani returned to the KRI from abroad after 2000. The KDP immediately tamed Chinginyani and made him a religious advisor of KDP's political bureau. The KDP provided Chinginyani a weekly TV

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[163] Faisal Mohammed. "Interview with Abdullateef Ahmad…"
[164] Salahaddin Bahaaddin. Phone interview with the author. April4, 2020.

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show on Zagros TV where he disavows his past Salafism, teaches a very moderate form of Islam that even Sufis disagree with and believe he is being too soft-hearted. Ahmad Abdullateef on the other hand, started teaching the ideology of Madkhalism branch of Salafism. Madkhalism is founded on the teaching of Sheikh Rabee Hadee Al-Madkhali, a Saudi cleric who is one of the most influential Salafi sheikhs in the kingdom. Within several years, Ahmad found thousands of Kurds, especially youths, gathered around himself. The increasing number of Salafists in the KRI, however, later resulted in emergence of various disintegrated and radical Salafi groups that threaten the KRI's political and social stability.

Many factors assisted the rapid spread of Salafism in the KRI. First, they translate and print Salafi books from the Arab Gulf and distribute them over every city, town and village of the KRI. Where they cannot reach, Salafists have many websites and blogs where people can visit wherever they are located. Their most famous website is www.ba8.org. created in 2010. Within ten years the website has near 15.5 million visitors, that is over 4000 visitors per day. The website is in Kurdish language. A large section is dedicated to the library. Books that the Salafi group publishes in hardcopy can be found is PDF format in this library. Another section contains lectures of Abdullateef and other Salafi imams close to him. The website also provides a great number of articles and fatwas on theological matters. It also offers its email and phone number and allows its visitors to send them questions about Salafism. Then they either post the responses on the website's Q&A section, or Ahmad responds to them on his daily show on Amozhgari TV.

Salafi sheikhs from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries financially aided Ahmad to establish Amozhagri TV.[165] The channel was first founded in 2011 and was broadcasting the Kurdish language of Al-Athar TV. Al-Athar is a Salafi TV station owned by the Yemeni Sheikh Salih Al-Bayzani. In March 2013 Ahmad changed the name of the TV to Amozhgari and started having its own Kurdish content. According to a former friend of Ahmad called Wishyar Chamchamali, Al-Bayzani donated one million dollars to Amozhgari TV.[166]

After Bayzani shut down his own TV station due to financial difficulties, he stopped funding Ahmad's channel too. Yet, Ahamd upgraded Amozhgari TV to an HD channel. Chamchamali claims that the Amozhgari TV station has an office in Bahrain and is now being funded by the Islamic Heritage Revival Society, a Salafi organization based in Kuwaiti[167]. Ubeyd Chamchamali, a Kurdish Salafi leader close to Ahmad, refuses those claims and argues that their TV station is solely financed by the Zakat (almsgiving) of local devout Muslims.[168]

Kurdish purist Salafists were united under Ahmad until before he opened Amozhgari TV. The opening of the TV channel, however, created factions within the Kurdistan Salafists camp. TV channels, and images in general, according to the radical thinking of Salafists, are haram (taboo) in Islam. Therefore opening a TV station by a Salafist leader himself was shocking for many Salafists. Its funding sources especially was controversial. When Ahmad claimed that he funds his TV channel with almsgiving, many of his followers reminded him of his own fatwa years earlier saying that "almsgiving

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[165] Ahmad. "Islamic Media in Kurdistan Region…"

[166] Idris Siwayli. "Amozhgari TV, the source of shattering of Salafists." 2018. Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center. Link http://www.kurdistanc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5312

[167] Ibid

[168] Ibid

money cannot be used to operate TV", a tradition practiced by Islamist political parties. Now that Ahmad is in a dire financial situation, his opponents argue, he changed his fatwa.

Ahmad came under a lot of pressure from various Salafi imams. He expelled and marginalized most of his critics[169] through a mechanism known among Salafism as "*tabdi'* (تبديع). Tabdi' is a less harsh form of *takfir*. Takfir is to accuse someone of being a kafir (infidel) and completely excommunicate them from religion. Tabdi' is to accuse someone of practicing *bida'a*. Bida'a. means innovation in religion. "Innovation in religion" is at the heart of disagreements between Salafists and the rest of Muslims. According to a hadeeth (sayings and practices of the prophet), "*The worst of things are those that are newly invented; every newly-invented thing is an innovation and every innovation is going astray, and every going astray is in the Fire"*[170]

In 2018 the imams whom Ahmad had marginalized, escalated their dispute with Ahmad further and went to sheikh Madkhali himself to arbitrate between them and Ahmad. Ahmad and his rival imams were both present at Sheikh Madkhali's guest room. Madkhali sided with Ahmad's rivals and asked Ahmad to shut down the TV channel but Ahmad refused. Sheikh Madkhali later disavowed Ahmad and excommunicated him from Salafism saying: "Ahmad is a mubtadi' (innovator), he has gone astray, and he has no honor!"[171] This led to a complete split of Kurdish Salafists between the supporters and opponents of Ahamd. Although Ahmad was expelled by Sheikh Madkhali, Ahmad still advocates for Madkhalism with some slight modifications. Sufi rivals of Ahmad still call him and his followers "Madkhali", a name that Ahmad refuses.

There are various Salafi groups, and each is led by some Salafist imams. There are *Mumayya'i* mostly located in Erbil and Duhok provinces, *Hujuris* who are dominant in Erbil, and there are *Haddadis* and *Sa'afiqis* in Chamchamal and Kirkuk.[172] *Hazimis* and the supporters of Ahmad are mainly located in Sulaymaniya. All these groups are Salafists at heart. What divides them is small theological disagreements within the Salafi ideology. For example, they disagree over whether Kurdish rulers and the majority of the KRI are Muslims or infidels, whether Salafists should interact with other non-Salafi Muslims or abstain from them. "Mumayya'i" for example, means "soft". Hazimis use this term to accuse the follower of sheikh Halabi, a Syrian Salafist leader, for being too soft on non-Salafists. Mumayya'is believe that one cannot excommunicate a Muslim for unknowingly committing a sin. Hazimis, in contrast, are hardliners and excommunicate any Muslim "sinner" whether they commit a sin knowingly or not.

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[169] Among some of those imams are Mohammed Mala Fayeq and Ahmad Mala Fayeq in Sulaymaniya, Mala Bahman in Kalar, Mala Shaduman in Tuz Xurmatu, Mala Abdulkareem Chwarqurna and sheikh Abu Manar Alami and Malah Kamaran in Erbil, and sheikh Hamdi Salafi.

[170] Muhammad Ben Saleh Utheimin. Do good and bad innovations exist in Islam?" Bahasht. 2012. http://ba8.org/prsyar-682 and The Book of the Prayer for the Two 'Eids. Book 19, Hadith 23. http://qaalarasulallah.com/hadithView.php?ID=41588 and

[171] Bebak Abdullah. "Sheikh Rabi Madkhali: Abdullateef Ahmad is a mubtadi' and has gone astray." Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Center.2018. Link http://www.kurdistanc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5340

[172] Abdullah. "Sheikh Rabi Madkhali…"

"Each of these group claim to be the true Salafists and excommunicates the rest."[173] According to Abu Harith, a prominent Salafi Kurd, "there are deep divisions among Salafists, they attack each other verbally every day, some of them are too radical, some of them are under the influence of political parties, and some are too young and inexperienced."[174] Despite various names under which Salafists in the KRI operate, they can be divided over two main groups; Ahamd's Madkhali Salafists who consist the majority, and the rest of smaller groups on the other frontier.

 In July 2019 a group of Iraqi Arab Salafists came together with the conflicting Kurdish Salafist groups in the town of Chamchamal, near Sulaymaniya. A peace agreement between the various Salafi Kurdish groups was signed at the gathering putting an end to years-long rivalry between them. Although there are numerous issues that these groups disagree over, there are two crucial points of disagreement that have deep political and societal ramifications. One of them is their perception towards the KRI leadership. The other is their perception towards the non-Salafist Muslim Kurds.

Madkhalis are pro KRI leadership and support them. Non-Madkhalis, in contrast, consider KRI leaders illegitimate and do not deem them fit to be obeyed. The ideology of Madkhaism itself serves the perpetuation of the elite power. According to them it is prohibited (*Haram*) to protest and revolt against rulers and instead demands their full obedient.[175] Rulers are considered *Ouli Amr,* a term used in Koran to describe those who are appointed by Allah to run the affairs of the Muslim community. Every time the KIU, KIG and IMK call for protests again the KRG, Madkhalis issue fatwas that these protests are un-Islamic and hence discourage people from attending them.[176]

Madkhais also abstain from any political activity and they consider the very existence of Islamist political parties *bida'a* and hence un-Islamic. However, due to Madkhalis' support for the rulers, their opponents call them "political party Salafists".

Non-Madkhali purist Salafists believe that if the leaders of a Muslim community do not abide by Sharia, then the "*ouli amr*" principle of Koran is not valid and does not apply on the current KRG leaders. Since PUK and KDP leaders are secular and believe in democracy, they are infidels, "*taghut*", and should not be obeyed.[177] Taghut is a corrupt leader, corrupt in the sense of religion. The term literally means someone who has passed the boundaries (of God). The advocates of such radical ideology are led by some influential imams such as Halo Hamarasheed, Abdulhameed Kuri Pak, Ismael Suskayi, and Kamaran Chawshin.

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[173] Ibid

[174] Salar Mahmoud. "Abu Harith: confronting government is contrary to religion." Diplomatic Magazine. 2018. http://diplomaticmagazine.net/religion/858

[175] Ali Bapir. Interview on Payam TV. Nov 29, 2016. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A7OnX39M-8k

[176] Ibid

[177] Abdulhameed Kuri Pak. "Imam Abdulhameed' opinion about Madxalis who consider the government as wali amr". The Great Islam YouTube Channel. Aug 19, 2017. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aEdKM067vs

and

Kamaran Chawshin. "The most powerful speech of imam Kamaran Kareem about what taghut is, and how to excommunicate a taghut?" The Great Islam YouTube Channel. Feb 7, 2019. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfTgCmgWAZI

The opponents of Madkhalis think that the ruling KDP and PUKs intentionally support the spread of this group[178]. They argue that, similar to their Arab counterparts, the KDP and the PUK leaders follow the divide-and-rule strategy in order to weaken the angry voices and demands for economic reform and good governance. The Kurdish elites strengthen one group against the other, turning Madkhalis against the political Islamist groups. While the KRG's Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) prohibits religious classes and gatherings inside the mosques other than prayer times; they turn a blind eye on Salafi gatherings, and their social and missionary activities. Ahmad is also being provided with armored cars and bodyguards; it is not clear by who.[179]

"Spy", "agents of rulers", "Arab", "guardians of taghut", "Saudi agents", and "Madkhalis" are among the most common names that the opponents of Madkhalis use to degrade them. They accuse Ahmad and his supporters of spying over Muslims in mosques and report anyone who is against the KRG leadership.

In a YouTube video[180] that has over 21K views and 1,100 likes, Kuri Pak, a non-Madkhali Salafi, reads a text message from one of his students who was arrested by the KDP security forces, interrogated and tortured. According to the text, the interrogator told Kuri Pak's student: "why do you have to be against the leadership? Why cannot you be like the followers of Ahmad? They do not stand against us and we do not hinder their activities and we like each other!" Whether this text message is true or not, Kuri Pak's message is clear: Madkhalis are the puppets of power.

Halo Hamarasheed, a world kung fu master and coach of the Iraqi Kung Fu team, runs his own martial arts training center since 1999. He has used his center as an effective recruiting tool of Salafism and reaching out to youths. Hamarasheed, who is also an imam hired by the MERA to provide services at a mosque, leads a fraction of purist Salafists who are known as Hazimis. Hazimi is the name of a Salafi theologian who believes that if a Muslim commits a sin due to ignorance (rather than intentionally), he/she can still be held accountable and hence punished for it. Hazimi had many followers among ISIS rankings. Four of them were executed by ISIS in a video for "being too extreme".[181]

Hamarasheed is known of his extreme sectarian rhetoric against anyone who is outside of his circle. He once got into a legal case with a popular Sufi imam called Fatih Sharseni, over theological debates. The two imams used Friday ceremonies to call each other names and their quarrel became a social trend for weeks. The Union of Islamic Scholars of Kurdistan (UISK) intervened and called both to the UISK's office to arbitrate between them.

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[178] Salahaddin Bahaaddin. Interview with Author. April 04, 2020.
and
Ali Bapir. Interview with Author. April 14, 2020
[179] Imam #1. Interview with Author. April 04, 2020
[180] Abdulhameed Kuri Pak. "Watch what seculars do to Muslims in Kurdistan". The Great Islam YouTube Channel. Oct 4, 2018. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlI0j_CR-10
[181] Avi Melamed. Al Hazimi Ideology: Radicalization of Extremism." July 23, 2017. Link: https://www.avimelamed.com/2017/07/23/al-hazimi-ideology-radicalization-of-extremism/

In an interview by one of his students[182], Hamarasheed is filmed in his library surrounded with hundreds of Salafi books. He brags about the innumerable books and sources available to him and people in the KRI nowadays. Hamarasheed claims that sometimes he searches for a *tafseer* (explanation of Koran) on the internet and can get access to 150 different sources for only one verse of Koran. He is best known for calling the KRI leadership *taghut* and calls them out in numerous Friday speeches and social media videos.

Those radical Salafists do not excommunicate KRI elite only, but also peshmarga, security forces and police. Peshmarga, the official army of the KRI, are the symbol of resistance and honor for the KRI. Insulting them is a redline and a taboo for the majority of the Kurds. For those Salafists, however, peshmargas are the defenders of *taghut* therefore infidels, and enemies of God[183]. They claim that peshmargas who get killed are not considered martyrs. Ahmad and other Madkhali imams affiliated with him, in contrast, pray for Peshmarga during Friday ceremonies and on their TV channels.[184] During the war with ISIS between 2014-2018 Madkhalis visited peshmaraga in the frontlines and provided them with food. Ahmad called out Hamarasheed for claiming that 95% of the KRI are not Muslims.[185]

Some non-Madkhali Salafists cannot be distinguished from the jihadi Salafists due to their anti-leadership rhetoric. As Mariwan Naqshabandi[186], an official at the KRG's MERA says, "We don't know when they [purist Salafists] will change. It can happen anytime." The spread of purist Salafism made it easy for the Jihadi Salafism to sneak into the Kurdish youth. It encouraged as many as 500 Kurdish youths to join ISIS[187]. Bakawan claims that this number is as high as 2000.[188]

Many of those youths were initially drawn into the Syrian civil war due to the emotional videos that the Qatari TV station Aljazeera and even Kurdish Islamist and secular media were broadcasting about Assad's atrocities against civilians. Some of those Kurdish members of ISIS participated in most wars against the Kurdish Peshmarga. The bigger threat, however, comes from the sleeper cells within the KRI. For example, on July 23rd 2018 three teenage gunmen armed with AK-47 rifles and hand grenades stormed the

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[182] Halo Hamarasheed. "Know imam Halo. Some questions about imam Halo's life." The True Word YouTube Channel. Mar 27, 2019. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iG1VAD7UaM

[183] Abdulahmmed Kuri Pak. "Kuri Pak: what is the sentence of Peshmarga and security forces (Asaysh)?" The Message of Islam YouTube. Jan 8, 2019. Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAS6Q_dwApw

[184] Mohammed, Faisal. "Interview with Abdullateef Ahmad" NRTTV. Part Two. Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CScI8lIjZM

[185] Abdullateef Ahmad. "A Response to the Takfiri Malal Halo, who excommunicates all imams who are Sufi, Salafi, and political." Yunus Ahmad YouTube Channel. Jul 20, 2019. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gynVelcoh8M

[186] Editorial Staff. "Iraqi Kurdistan monitors Salafi mullahs to thwart Islamic State influence" Ekurd Daily. 2015. Link: https://ekurd.net/iraqi-kurdistan-monitors-salafi-mullahs-to-thwart-islamic-state-influence-2015-05-14

[187] Ibid

[188] Bakawan. Three Generations of Jihadism…"

building of Erbil governorate[189]. They killed one employee and wounded two policemen. The KDP forces later arrested Ismael Suskayi, a purist Salafist imam, for plotting the attack. He was put on KDP affiliated TV channels confessing his allegiance to the ISIS. He is now jailed on charges of terrorism.

Salafist imams have also increased the hatred towards Shia and Iran among the Kurds. According to Kamaran Chawshin "Shia are *rafidha[190]*, including Maliki and Iran. They are the cancer of this ummah (Muslim nation), they are the dirt of this ummah who can only be cleaned through killing. They are infidels, and whoever does not excommunicate them is also an infidel".[191]

Some Salafists especially depicted the October War in 2017 between the KRI and Baghdad as a sectarian war between (Kurdish) Sunnis and Shia. According to Mullah Krekar the war was a sectarian war by Shia that include Baghdad, Tehran and Hezbollah against all Sunni Kurds. For Krekar, Kurds are Sunnis first. Hence, they need to rethink their position in Iran-US conflict. "You cannot fight a sectarian war with an ethnic one" Krekar says, "it is us as Sunnis versus Iran and all Shias" he insists.[192] Krekar called on Islamists of Kurdistan to create the "Ahl-i Hall u Aqd" a committee of people who find solutions for issues of Muslims. He asked all sectarian Kurdish groups to ignore their internal differences among them and unite against Shia.[193] Krekar's alternative is, according to him, secular nationalism political parties have gone bankrupt and cannot solve the Kurdish issue. Most importantly, Krekar calls the Kurdish-Shia conflict a "Neo-Safavid War". Other Salafists imams also promote a very anti-Shia rhetoric, although not all of them draw a Shia-Kurd war.

The threats posed by the Salafists served as a wake-up call for the Kurdish officials. Many Kurdish politicians call for fighting the ideology[194]. Now the KRG has taken strict measures against the non-Madkhai Salafism. The KRG banned the books of 10 Salafi ulama, including prominent Salafi imams such as Albani, Ibn Baz and Utheimin[195]. The MERA monitors Salafi imam[196], and checks their Friday speeches. The ministry punishes any imam that violates the moderate and peaceful rhetoric outlined by the MERA. It so far has expelled 10 imams due to their extremist Friday speeches, including Hamarasheed. Despite banning Salafi textbooks, internet can always be the alternative and easier way to get access to those sources.

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[189] Azad Lashkari. "Security forces end attack on Erbil governorate by suspected Islamic State militants". Reuters. 2018. Link: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-kurds-attack/security-forces-end-attack-on-erbil-governorate-by-suspected-islamic-state-militants-idUSKBN1KD0MF

[190] *Rafidha* in Arabic means "refuser". It is a derogatory name used by anti-Shia Sunnis referring to Shias who refused the reign of the first three Caliphs of Islam.

[191] Kamaran Chawshin. "Imam Kamaran Kareem: Are Shia infidel?" The Great Islam YouTube Channel. Jul 6, 2018. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3Ta9Bw_S4g

[192] Fatih Krekar. "The betrayal of October 16, the threat of Shia Iran on Kurdistan, IGK and Ali Bapir the agents of Iran". Imam Krekar's YouTube Channel. Oct 20, 2018. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_A3cwbrVTpM

[193] Ibid

[194] Rudaw Media Network. "Prominent Kurdish politician argues to save Islam from Salafism". 2019. Link. https://www.rudaw.net/english/culture/18012019

[195] Al Jazeera. "Kurdistan Government banns books of ten prominent Muslim ulama". May 26, 2015. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSBuBRyP-SU

[196] Editorial Staff. "Iraqi Kurdistan monitors…" Ekurd Daily

Kamaran Chawshin had never been allowed by the MERA to provide Friday ceremonies. All his preaches were through social media and personal contacts. He was arrested several times by the KDP security forces. According to his biography on his Facebook fan page, he was last arrested in October 2015. He spent seven months in jail where he was tortured. He then allegedly was poisoned before being released. On the way out, Chawshin weighed only 36 Kg (79 lbs). He died of his wounds in February 2018. Kuri Park is one of the very few remaining non-Madkhali Salafi imams who openly criticizes the KRI leadership, thanks to the freedom of speech in Europe where he lives now.

Ahmad accuses "secular advisor of the rulers" and "believers in myth" for brainwashing the KRI elite and turning them against Salafists. "Believers in myth" is another term that Salafists describe Sufis with. Salafists claim that Sufi beliefs and their stories about their sheikhs, such as sheikh's ability of time-travelling and knowing the future- as myths and call Sufis "khurafi"s.

Salafists vs. Sufis in KRI

As mentioned before, the majority of Kurds are Shafi'i Sunnis. Salafists, on the other hand, adhere to Hanbali Sunni. That is one of the main difference between Kurdish Salafists and the rest of the KRI Muslims. For Salafists, however, Muslims in general are divided over two groups: *Ahli Salaf* (people who follow the early generation of Islam, or Salafists) and *Ahli bida'a* (people who follow the innovations in Islam).[197] Despite their internal disputes, Salafists in general have one common enemy: *ahli bida'a* (people of innovation). While Madkhalis are less harsh in excommunicating the rest of the Muslim Kurds, many non-Madkhali Salafists do not shy away from calling anyone not following them an infidel.

Madkhalis have daily TV shows dedicated to criticizing the rituals practiced by Sufism and their beliefs. Sufis, like Shias, revere the sheikhs and saints. They see their sheikhs, whether dead or alive, as a connection between them and God. For Salafists these beliefs are un-Islamic and similar to the idolatry and ungodly practices of the pre-Islamic community of Mecca. Some Salafist scholars issue extreme fatwas excommunicating Sufis and considering them *Mushrik* (polytheists). The most derogatory term to describe Sufis, however, is *Shakhs parast* in Kurdish, meaning human worshiper, or *gor parast* meaning tomb worshiper.

There are many names that Islamic groups in the KRI use as codes to describe and degrade each other (see appendix 1). The most widespread term used by Salafists when they name their opponents is "*mubtadi*" or "*bida'achi*". It is another derivative of the aforementioned "*bida'a*" in Arabic. It literally means "innovator". The term describes those who practice some rituals that are not of the origins of Islam. For instance, Salafists criticize the celebration of Mawlid (the observance of the birthday of Islamic prophet). Mawlid is one of the most important days in the KRI. On that day, most of the stores, especially delight stores, distribute delights and drink over people for free. Religious songs are played loud on the microphones over every minaret. Salafists, however, argue that since the prophet never celebrated his birthday Muslims should not either. Doing so, Salafists believe, is a *bid'a*.

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[197] Imam #1. Phone interview with the author. April 04, 2020.

Salafists distant themselves from the majority of the Kurdish Muslims.[198] They build mosques exclusively to themselves. In Soran, a city 100 km east of Erbil, there have been two mosques that have traditionally been under the influence of Sufi orders. Now one of the mosques is completely dominated by Salafists. Non-Salafists do not worship in that mosque. Due to the increasing number of Salafists in the city, now they have opened their second mosque.[199] Most of Salafists do not partake in group prayers with other Muslims. They refuse to participate in group religious ceremonies that are considered un-Islamic by Salafism.

Other doctrinal principles that Salafists stand against are minor differences which might not be that important in religion yet practicing them or avoiding them have huge social impact. For example, they forbid visiting graves and tombs. They do not pray in mosques that have graveyard in front their *qibla* (where it faces Mecca). They protest against imams who pray loudly (called *tasbihat*) after a group prayer. They argue with Sufis over the posture and how far they place their feet from each other during standing in a prayer.

Some other practices by Salafists themselves features them and make them distinguishable among the rest of the society such as growing long beard, shaving mustaches, and wearing short pants that do not go down their ankles.

There is a widespread conspiracy theory among Sufi supporters that Salafists are the creation of the US and Israel in order to divide the Muslims. Mullah Safeen (a pseudonyms to hide his identity), is an influential imam in Erbil, whose mosque hosts near 500 Muslims every Friday. He strongly believes in the theory and his proof is that "Salafism threatens the group solidarity and social cohesion in the KRI. It has caused a dramatic social division and intra-communal antagonism, these only benefit infidels."[200] There are many cases of Salafists excommunicating their parents, siblings, and relatives.[201] These incidents usually lead to domestic violence.[202] "A young man who just starts to pray five times a day and reads couple of books", Bahaaddin complains, "excommunicates his own father who has been practicing Islam for 40 years!"

Non-Salafi groups, on the other hand, avoid disputes among themselves. Salahaddin Bahaaddin, the leader of the IUK says that his group does not want to get involved in sectarian discourse. For him, the name-calling, insults and disputes are due to some "compulsive youth who have recently learned few things about religion and think that they are authorized to give fatwas."[203] Bahaaddin claims that his party wants to have good relations with everyone in the KRI including the communist Kurds. He wants to focus only on civil, social and political activities and spread a moderate, peaceful and tolerant version of Islam[204]. However, that has not prevented his followers and the rest of non-Salafi Muslims in the KRI from getting dragged into the sectarian rift against Salafists. They have used their mosques and media outlets to either attack or defend against Salafists.

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[198] Bebak Abdullah. "Salafists of Kurdistan: emergence and disintegration". Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center. 2018. http://www.kurdistanc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5328
[199] Interview with a Sufi imam in a Soran
[200] Imam #1. Interview with Author. April 4, 2020
[201] Imam #2. Interview with Author. April 4, 2020
[202] Ibid
[203] Salahaddin Bahaaddin. Interview with Author. April, 04, 2020.
[204] Ibid

Sufi leaders strongly oppose the teachings of Salafism and their activities. In 2015 Sufi sheikhs gave a fatwa that watching Amozhgari TV is haram. Once they realized that the fatwa had little impact, in a press conference they demanded the KRG to shut the TV station down otherwise they will attack it themselves and close it by force.[205]

The KRG organizes periodical workshops, seminars and conferences for all those religious groups to fade divisions among them and reduce sectarian tensions. Most of those events are under code names like "coexistence", "tolerance", "moderate rhetoric", and "unifying our rhetoric". During one of those conferences, Ahmad grabbed the microphone and told the organizers of the event: "I challenge those non-Salafi imams here to let me lead a prayer. After this event ends, lets go out and pray, I will pray with any Sufi or political imam. But will *they* let a Salafist imam lead the prayer? I doubt it!". Ahmad's challenge sparked a backlash among the Sufi imams and the conference organizers intervened to calm the situation down.

Salafists are more active on social media, websites and blogs. Mullah Safeen argues that if one searches on Islamic theology online, 99% of the results are dominated by Salafists.[206] "They work hard day and night and take advantage of every means," he complains, "we are not as active." Although he admits that he uses his mosque and social media, especially Facebook, to fight Salafism, most Sufi Kurds still focus on traditional media outlets such as TV channels and radio stations. According to the Ministry of Culture (MOC) data, religious groups in the KRI operate 14 local TV stations, three satellite TV stations, and 21 radio stations.

Among the local TV channels, the IUK owns five of them which is the highest number compared to the other groups. Three of them are located in Erbil and two in Sulaymaniyah. The IGK comes second and owns three domestic TV channels, IMK owns two, and the Union of Islamic Scholars of Kurdistan (UISK) owns one. The three other channels are owned by Sufi imams: Masoud Kani Kurdayi (Asman TV), Mazhar Xorasani (Sirusht TV), and Mullah Hoshyar (Tasawuf TV) (see table 3. and for the list of those TV channels and their affiliation see appendix 2).

IGK opened the first Kurdish Islamic satellite channel in 2008 called Payam TV. The same year IUK opened its satellite Speda TV. The IMK opened Rabun TV satellite channel in 2012 but had to shut it down shortly after due to financial difficulties. Salafists, are mentioned before, operate Amozhgari TV.

TV Affiliation	Number
IUK	5
IGK	3
Sufi	3
IMK	2
UISK	1

Table 3. Local tv channels owned by Islamic groups in the KRI

The IUK and the IGK each own seven radio stations throughout the KRI, Salafists own five, and the UISK and IMK each own one (see table 4).

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[205] Kotay YouTube Channel. "The Conflict between Salafists and Sufis of Kurdistan, to the extent of accusing each other with terror." May 18, 2015. Viideo: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuIgpE6HVuU

[206] Imam #3. Phone interview with author. April 4, 2020.

Affiliation	Number of radio stations
IUK	7
IGK	7
Salafi	5
UISK	1
IMK	1

Table 4. number of radio station owned by Islamic groups in the KRI

The media of Kurdish Islamist political party experience a dilemma between their Islamic ideologies and pragmatism. In order to attract viewers, they need to have modern TV shows that women play roles in. However, these types of productions are not compatible with some radical principles mapped out in programs of political Islamists. Therefore, many radical high-ranking members and affiliates of the IGK criticize their political party leadership for acting against their political party's agenda. Under these pressures, the IGK opened its second channel called Payam TV 2, dedicated to Da'awa only. Later they changed the name to Bangawaz (The Call, Da'awa).[207]

Social media is probably the most heated battlefield among sectarian groups in the KRI. After going through YouTube and examining 87 channels of Kurdish sectarian groups, I found out that the total number of subscribers of only those channels is over 3 million subscribers (the population of the KRI is 5.2 million[208]). The total number of views of only those 87 channels is 668 million. They have uploaded more than 110,000 videos. Salafists are more active on YouTube than any other group combined. About 43% of those YouTube channels belong to Salafists alone, while the rest are affiliated with other Kurdish Muslim groups such as IUK, IGK, IMK, Sufis and independent.

Salafists and Salafi jihadists have the highest number of subscribers compared to the other groups. The top Kurdish YouTube channel belongs to a Madkhali Salafist named Raad Muhammad Kurdi. He has around 1.3 million subscribers with 150 million total views of his 1,195 videos. The second most popular sectarian channel is Baraw Amanj, which often publishes Krekar's speeches. It has almost half a million subscribers, 250 million views and 1912 videos. Third is a Salafi channel called "Gazya ma" that has 96K subscribers, over 27 million views and 2619 videos.

Krekar's YouTube channel ranks the 4th and has 90K subscribers, over 27 million views and 5136 videos. A quick search among comments on his videos illustrates how popular he is among the KRI youth. Krekar also has an official website (https://krekar.co) where he uploads his books, fatwas, and speeches.

Although the IGK is the most active among other channels and has the highest number of uploaded videos (nearly 20,000 videos only on one channel), their views are extremely low (9%) compared to the other channels.

Most of these YouTube channels publish sectarian videos with dangerous and degrading titles. I reviewed 50 videos uploaded by them. The majority of the content is about the disagreements among those groups that were mentioned throughout this paper. Some of those videos are of individual imams speaking from their mosque or home against

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[207] Bahaaddin. "Islamic Media in Kurdistan
[208] Kurdistan Regional Government. "The Kurdistan Region in Brief"
http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/p/page.aspx?l=12&s=050000&r=300&p=210

their opponents. Other videos show debates and sometimes heated disputes among sectarian groups on TV shows, conferences, and seminars. Some of those videos are about fatwas that one cannot pray in a mosque where a political party affiliated imam is leading the prayer. Numerous videos are about excommunicating imams who are affiliated with the KDP and PUK and whoever goes to their mosques.

The total view of those videos is well over one million. Those videos have about 16,000 likes and only 958 dislikes. I reviewed 1638 comments on those 50 videos. Among them, 710 were supporting the sectarian rhetoric of the videos, 448 were responding against the content of the video, and the rest were neutral. What is alarming is that 619 comments, in both sides, were dangerously sectarian. The content of those sectarian comments range from threatening each other with killing, giving fatwa that shedding blood of mentioned imams is halal, calling KRI leaders infidels and *taghut*, demanding the implementation of Sharia, setting rules on how to interact with *ahli bida'a* (non-Salafists), how a Salafi should not greet others.

Conclusion

Sufi Islam was the source of Kurdish nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries because its taqriqat sheikhs were literate. The role of Sufism decreased due to various factors; Kurdish sheikhs were under constant pressure from the Iraqi governments due to their political activities, new and foreign ideologies such as communism and socialism spread throughout Iraq, secular policies of Iraq reduced the role of those tariqats, and state provided education that replaced *hujra* and madrasas. Instead, limited modern education system provided by the state schools increased the role of secular Kurdish nationalists from 1920s until 1970s.

Islamists reemerged from 1950s but only became active in 1970s due to the failure of Kurdish revolution in 1975, the death of Mustafa Barzani in 1979 which diversified the Kurdish political landscape, the Islamic Revolution of Iran 1979, and the atrocities of the Baath regime against the Kurds in 1980s. The Kurdish Islamists at that time were Sufis but at the same time they were under heavy influence of political Islam such as the MB. Theological schism, sectarianism, and excommunication among those Islamists were rare before 1991. Disagreements between the IMK and Bahaaddin's MB were over the methods of serving the Kurdish cause. Theological matters and Islamic science were still limited to the leadership of those Islamist groups. But due to the spread of Salafi books and Afghan jihad those Islamists turned towards Pan-Islamic projects and anti-Kurdish nationalism. However, the secular Kurdish KDP and PUK weakened those groups between the two Gulf Wars.

After 2003, however, mass communications and the increasing rate of literacy raised purist Salafism in the KRI to an unprecedented level. Mass media became a heated battlefield between the Salafists and the Sufi Kurds. Hence, while Kurds were mostly nationalist Sufis 100 years ago, now there are large numbers of Kurds who are influenced by Salafism of the Arab Gulf and insult those sheikhs and tariqats.

Literacy does not always lead to nationalism. The relationship between literacy/mass communications and sectarianism was illustrated in section four. The survey responses and the interview with Islamist leaders and the imams confirms this relationship. Literacy has increased in the KRI but most of the people do not use this ability to learn science and technology. There are very limited to no factories and modern technological

industries to drive this motivation. Sectarian entrepreneurs, on the other hand, provide people with their books. Hence literate people tend to read more about religion and get into smaller theological matters. Sectarian groups also use mass media to reach out to people through media outlets and social media such as YouTube. If people had questions about religion before 1991, they had to ask imams as they were the only ones who had access to the original religious sources. Now, wherever one is located in the KRI, they can have access to innumerable sources online. Since there are numerous different explanations and sectarian groups behind them, Kurdish Muslims follow different schools, and this eventually leads to disagreements and schism in their daily lives. These differences at the same time, cause deep political and societal ramifications.

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Chapter 3:

'Regional Acceptance' as an Alternative to 'International Recognition' for Unrecognized States:

How the KRI gets itself accepted by the regional actors of the Middle East

Introduction

Unrecognized states are "territories that have achieved de facto independence, yet have failed to gain international recognition as independent states."[209] They are relatively new to the world politics and political science as they are mainly distinguished with their lack of membership in United Nations (UN) which was established after WWII. Unrecognized states increased in number and significance especially after 1991 with the collapse of the USSR (chart 1). They are different from other non-state actors such as "shadow states" – the territory controlled by Taliban in Afghanistan after their defeat by the US– and "insurgent states" – e.g. Islamic State also known as ISIS in Iraq and Syria – in that they do not challenge the world order; they rather want to be a part of it.[210] "Therefore, "de facto states not only aim to maintain their de facto independence, but they also pursue different strategies to achieve international recognition,[211] which remains their ultimate goal.[212]"[213]

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[209] Nina Caspersen, and Gareth R. V. Stansfield, ed. "Unrecognized States in the International System." (London. Routledge 2011)

[210] Caspersen and Stansfield, Unrecognized States in the… p.3

[211] Caspersen, 2012, p.106 cited from Kamaran Palani, Jaafar Khidir, Mark Dechesne & Edwin Bakker (2019): The development of Kurdistan's de facto statehood: Kurdistan's September 2017 referendum for independence, Third World Quarterly, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1619452. p.4

[212] Richards & Smith, 2015, p. 1717 in Palani et al. The development of Kurdistan's… p.4

[213] Kamaran Palani, Jaafar Khidir, Mark Dechesne & Edwin Bakker (2019): The development of Kurdistan's de facto statehood: Kurdistan's September 2017 referendum for independence, Third World Quarterly, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1619452. p.4

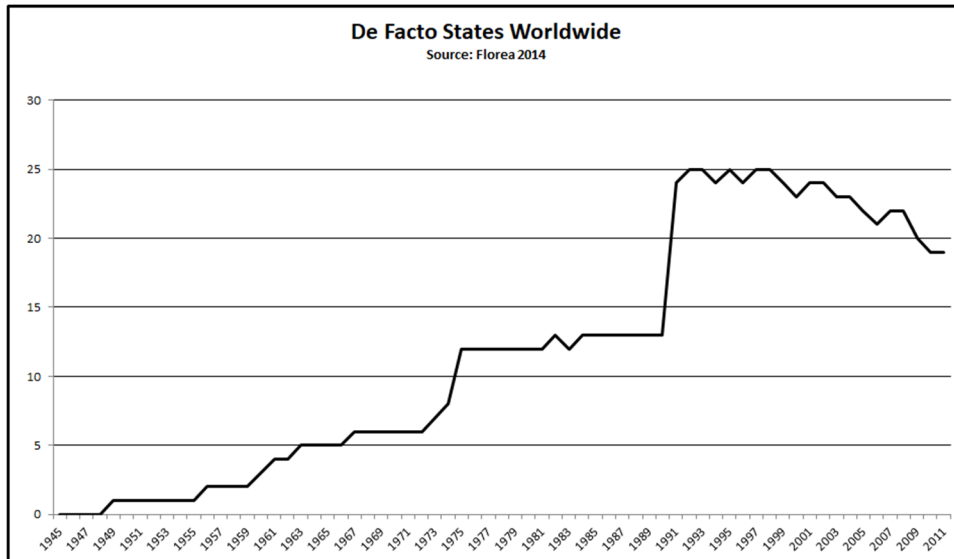**De Facto States Worldwide**
Source: Florea 2014

Chart 1. Number of de facto states by year[214]

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), as a de facto state, has enjoyed autonomy in the Kurdish part of northern Iraq independently from Baghdad since 1991, with a fluctuating autonomy, yet the international community has not recognized it as an independent state. Throughout its 29 years of history the KRI leadership openly and practically declared its plans for independence only between 2014 to 2017. Although Kurdish officials do not hide their desires of independence, other than those four years, the KRI's official foreign policy has been staying within Iraq and protecting its unity.

Why did the Kurdish leadership not declare independence during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq? Why, instead, did they participate in rebuilding and being a part of Iraq? What is the nature of the KRG's foreign relations with states actors of the Middle East? What turned the KRI-Turkey hostile relations into a strong alliance between 2009 and 2017? How do Turkey and Iran make sure that the KRI does not become independent? How did Iran strike a deal with a fraction within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 2017 to sabotage the independence referendum sponsored by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)?

This paper focuses on the KRI leadership's rhetoric and actions towards statehood as well as the KRI's relations with two regional powers and neighbors: Turkey and Iran. It is argued that the KRI, like any other de facto state, strives to achieve international recognition. To that end, it builds state institutions, gilds its political system with democracy, and maximizes its power. However, this paper argues, instead of directly asking for international recognition (IR) the KRI pursues an alternative, less risky policy: regional acceptance (RA). Regional acceptance is a policy through which the KRI placates the regional powers and assures them that the KRI does not cause regional disturbance by breaking up from Iraq. Instead, parallel to its state-making efforts, the KRI cooperates with the regional powers, especially its Iran and Turkey. The KRI assures its immediate neighbors that the de facto state does not partition from Iraq. In return, the KRI expects those countries to accept the KRI as a legitimate actor with its unique status. Turkey and

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[214] Adrian Florea (2014) De Facto States in International Politics (1945–2011): A New Data Set, International Interactions, 40:5, 788-811, DOI: 10.1080/03050629.2014.915543

Iran do recognize the KRI's social *and* corporate identity in return. More on these two types of identities and their different types of recognition will be elaborated on in the literature review section.

Simply put, the KRI leadership openly express their desire of independence and practically build a successful model of a state and maximize the KRI power, however, other than the 2017 independence referendum, rhetorically and practically the KRI asks the regional powers of their acceptance as a legitimate actor instead of asking for international recognition as an independent state.

Finally, parallel to their formal relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Turkey and Iran work directly and independently with the political parties within the KRI to control and limit the KRI's rising power. The two countries use their influence over those political parties to impact the KRI's domestic politics, turn the Kurds against each other, weaken them, and prevent the KRI from achieving its full independence.

Literature review

Compared to independent nation state, unrecognized states are new actors to the theater of the international relations. Our understanding towards those anomalies, by the same token, is limited, as there is limited literature surrounding them. In the literature of unrecognized states 'international recognition' usually occupies the center around which the foreign and domestic policies of those de facto states rotate around. Scholars, such as Ayyoub, Stanisfeld, Caspersen, and Jud, tend to perceive the efforts of building state institutions and even democratization process in unrecognized states as means to convince the international community that those states-in-waiting deserve to get international recognition. In this section, I will compare the KRI's endeavor of state making to the experience of similar unrecognized states.

Since most of the unrecognized state are born out of conflict, the basic and most common feature that defines them is that they usually rely on patron states against the parent states to keep their path towards independence and/or survival. For Fearon[215] and Walter[216], unrecognized states rely on patron states as security guarantors, while for Flores and Nooruddin patron states provide financial aid[217]. That is because, as Caspersen and Bakke et al write, the international status of these de facto states as "unrecognized states" prevents them from taking international loans from international institutions such as IMF, at the same time the insecurity of their internal politics daunts international investors to engage and hence limits economic prosperity.[218] Therefore, Bakke et al write,

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[215] James D. Fearon. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." The American Political Science Review 577–92. 1994. P.88

[216] Barbara F. Walter. "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement." International Organization 335–64. 1997. P.51

[217] Thomas E Flores, & Irfan Nooruddin. Credible commitment in post-conflict recovery. In Christopher Coyne, & Rachel Matters (Eds.), Handbook of the political economy of war. London: Edward Elgar. (2011).

[218] Nina Caspersen. "Degrees of legitimacy: Ensuring internal and external support in the absence of recognition". Geoforum 66 (2015) 184–192. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.10.003 p.190
also see:

unrecognized states heavily rely on patron states to compensate for these mentioned shortages.[219]

Unrecognized states like Transdniestria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia rely on Russia as a patron state both financially and militarily. Transdniestria receives financial aid from Mosco but has not been in need for military aid since it has been relatively in peace after declaring independence. The financial aid from Russia, according to Transdniestria's former minister of industry, makes 20% of Transdniestria's budget which mostly comes in the form of low gas prices and support for education.[220]

Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, however, have witnessed some degree of political violence internally as well as with their parent states. Therefore, Bakke et al write, they rely on Mosco both for military and financial aid.[221] In 2008 Russia had to intervene to save South Ossetia from a military invasion by Georgia. South Ossetia also gets financial aid from Mosco. Abkhazia, on the other hand, took control over Kodor region of Georgia in 2006 with the help from Russian air forces.

Nagorno-Karabakh has been through both internal rift between its various elites, as well as violence with its parent state, Azerbaijan in 2016. Nagorno-Karabakh receives financial aid from its parent state, Armenia[222]. According to De Waal, at one point Nagorno-Karabakh was like a province of Armenia where its citizens had Armenian passports.[223]

It is important to note, Bakke et al, argue, that despite heavy reliance on patron states, unrecognized states try to reduce the importance of their dependence on the patron state in the eyes of both, international actors and their own citizens.[224] Relying too much on patron states undermines de facto states' leadership credibility and their claims of independence. Unrecognized states want to be seen as functioning independent entities by establishing diplomatic relations with other international state actors, open their representatives abroad and have state actors' consulates on their territory.

Furthermore, unrecognized states follow examples of the recognized states by building modern institutions of governance. For Berg and Molder[225] and Caspersen,[226] elites of unrecognized states have to convince external actors that they are good state

Kristin M. Bakke, Andrew M. Linke, John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal. "Dynamics of state-building after war: External-internal relations in Eurasian de facto states". Political Geography 63 (2018) 159e173   p.161

[219] Bakke, et al. "Dynamics of state-building…" p.161

[220] Bakke, et al. "Dynamics of state-building…" p.162

[221] Ibid

[222] Pål Kolstø. "The sustainability and future of unrecognized quasi-states." 2006. Journal of Peace Research, 43(6), 723e740.

[223] Thomas De Waal. "Black garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war." New York: New York University Press. 2004. P.246

[224] Bakke, et al. "Dynamics of state-building…" p.162

[225] Eiki Berg and Martin Molder. "Who is entitled to 'earn sovereignty'? Legitimacy and regime support in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh." Nations and Nationalism 18 (3), 2012, 527–545. DOI: 10.1111/j.1469-8129.2011.00527.x

[226] Nina Caspersen. "Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Modern International System." Polity Press. 2012

builders and that they deserve to become independent states. As MacQueen writes, elites of unrecognized states present their model of state building as a "pitch" to the international community by involving in diplomatic relations, building institutions of governance, and democratizing their politics.[227] On the other hand, the internal legitimacy of those unrecognized states is contingent to convincing their citizens that they are good state-builders; they can also, like the central government or the parent state, provide security and welfare.[228] At the same time, they promote national identity internally in order to keep their fragile polity together against external foes, in most cases the parent states.

Transnistria, Abkhazia, Somaliland, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and the KRI all claim to be democratic. That is, Caspersen and Ishiyama and Batta[229] argue, in order to look like a state and to gain international recognition. Caspersen names this strategy: "recognition-through-democratization-and-state-building".[230]

In reality, however, most of the unrecognized states are "hybrid regimes"[231]. According to Protsyk, a hybrid regime is between autocracy and democracy[232]. That is because, on the one hand, elites of the de facto states need to convince the external actors that their polities are democratic in order to comply with international norms. On the other hand, using external threats as an excuse, elites refuse to easily leave power.

According to Protsyk, Transnistria's political system is a hybrid one[233]. Transnistrian leaders, after secession, established a presidential system which granted too much power in the hands of the president. The motive behind this move, Protsyk argues, was to establish a strong an effective power against the external threats.[234] At the same time, Protsyk writes, the political system in Transnistria encourages independent candidates for the parliament which discourages political parties to focus on organizing as opposition against the ruling system.

Government in Abkhazia is democratically elected, and it is semi-presidential. There have been processes of power transition between different leaders. Nagorno-Karabakh has a semi-presidential system and the prime minister's powers were transferred to president in 2017. President's terms are maximum two five-year terms. South Ossetia

[227] Benjamin MacQueen. "Democratization, elections and the 'de facto state dilemma': Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government." Cooperation and Conflict. 2015, Vol. 50(4) 423–439. P.424

[228] Kristin M. Bakke, O'Loughlin, John, Toal, Gerard, & Ward, Michael D. "Convincing state-builders? Disaggregating internal legitimacy in Abkhazia." 2014. International Studies Quarterly, 58(3), 591e607.

[229] John Ishiyama and Anna Batta. "The emergence of dominant political party systems in unrecognized states." Communist and Post-Communist Studies 45 (2012) 123–130

[230] Nina Caspersen. "States without sovereignty: imitating democratic statehood". In: Caspersen, N., Stansfield, G. (Eds.), Unrecognized States in the International System. Routledge, London, pp. 73–89.

[231] Larry Diamond. "Elections without democracy: Thinking about hybrid regimes." Journal of Democracy 13(2): 21–35. (2002) Link: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/17195

[232] Oleh Protsyk. "Secession and hybrid regime politics in Transnistria." Communist and Post-Communist Studies 45 (2012) 175–182

[233] Protsyk. Secession and hybrid regime…

[234] Protsyk. Secession and hybrid regime…

has a presidential system where the president is the head of state and has control over the government. According to Caspersen and Stansfield, the government of Somaliland is an example of stable democracy in a region where democracy is mostly shaky.[235]

Despite all these hard efforts to gain independence mentioned above, most of the times unrecognized states face a sad reality. Unlike the 20th century when the majority of the current nation-states were born, the 21st century so far has proven to be resilient towards new states. As Ahram in "*Break all the Borders*"[236] writes, out of all the wars broken out in the Middle East by the secessionists in the past decade, non could lead to a new state. Yet, as Ahram further argues, those de facto states are difficult to be removed and hence they are here to stay.

There are many similarities between the techniques of state making by the KRI and the other unrecognized states, such as democratization, building state institutions, and seeking a patron state. However, what distinguishes the KRI from the rest of de facto states is that the KRI has never declared independence. Instead, the KRI slowly works for independence while verbally assuring external actors that the KRI will not secede from Iraq.

Experience has proved that the bordering countries reject the KRI's recognition until an unforeseeable future. Those same actors, however, are willing to accept the KRI as an autonomous federal region within Iraq. Hence, it prioritizes a policy that strives to attain "regional acceptance" (RA) over "international recognition" (IR). While the former is a necessity to secure survival and prosperity, the latter is a long-term ambition enabling it to engage in international relations within the full capacity of a sovereign state. Convincing a regional power and/or immediate neighbor to accept those fragile entities as legal entities carries far more significance than being internationally recognized by some remote countries in another continent. The KRI is a landlocked region. Its prosperity is contingent to the neighboring countries. Thus, for the KRI to be accepted by a key regional and neighboring power such as Turkey is more rewarding than being internationally recognized by Australia or all 33 countries of Latin America.

IR	RA
Difficult to achieve	Easier to achieve
It is a long-term *ambition*	It is an immediate *necessity*
It provides benefits of involving in international relations, e.g. treaties	It provides the benefit to interact with regional counties e.g. signing trade agreements
It requires a formal procedure towards becoming a UN member	No formal procedure involved
Once attained, it cannot be easily taken away	It can be taken away

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[235] Caspersen, and Stansfield, ed. "Unrecognized States in the International…"
[236] Ariel Ahram. "Break all the Borders: Separatism and the Reshaping of the Middle East." Oxford University Press. 2019

By adapting the RA policy, the KRI leadership has to remain within the mother state but still be keep its autonomy and at the same time gets itself accepted by regional actors as legal and valid actors. RA involves establishing diplomatic relations, strengthening economic ties, and engaging in security cooperation with regional actors.

If the unrecognized states succeed in getting RA, however, that leads to numerous benefits and advantages that otherwise are almost impossible. In some instances, it can go as far as the de facto recognition of the unrecognized state's social and corporate identities. Wendt wrote that states have two different types of identities: corporate and social. "Corporate identity refers to the intrinsic, self-organizing qualities that constitute actor individuality" while a social identity is "a set of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object".[237] By the same token, according to Wendt, there are two different types of identity recognition; "thin" and "thick".[238] "Thin" recognition "refers to the external acknowledgment of a subject having a specific formal status or personality within a community of law, whereas "thick" recognition refers to the outside acknowledgment of particular non-formal character, standing, rank or position within a larger social setting."[239]

 According to socio-psychological theories identity is contingent to outside recognition[240]. Meaning, "the corporate identity of a state cannot exist without external recognition as other states determine though it the fulfillment of the criteria of statehood in international law"[241]. That is to say, de facto states do not have a corporate identity. However, the social identity can exist without outside recognition. "It depends exclusively on the self-understanding of the persons composing the group."[242] Recognition of the corporate identity has advantages such as "acceding to international treaties and conventions, conducting normal diplomatic and economic relations, joining intergovernmental organizations, receiving foreign aid, and enjoying the various protections as a subject of international law."[243]

In the case of the KRI, there have been instances where Turkey and Iran have recognized the KRI's social *and* corporate identity. It is important to emphasize that the de facto recognition of these two identities only takes place in certain cases, such as during a certain treaty or trade. For example, Turkey challenged Baghdad's authority over the KRI in 2012 and allowed Erbil to export its oil through Turkish Ceyhan port. Although Baghdad expressed its explicit disapproval, Turkey and the KRI signed the agreement as two independent states. This was an unusual agreement between a state and a sub-state actor, especially giving that the agreement took place despite the tough objection from Baghdad.

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[237] Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State". American Political Science Review, Vol. 88, No. 2, 1994, pp. 384-396, p. 385.
[238] Alexander Wendt. "Why a World State is Inevitable." European Journal of International Relations 9 (4): 491-542. (2003: 511-512),
[239] Mikulas Fabry. Unrecognized States and National Identity. Annual of Language and Politics and Politics of Identity 10(1):19-30 · January 2016 p.20
[240] Wendt. Why a World State….
[241] Fabry. Unrecognized States… p.20
[242] Fabry. Unrecognized States… p.20
[243] Fabry. Unrecognized States… p. 21

However, that does not mean that Ankara officially and always recognizes the KRI' social and corporate identities. Another example is when Ankara allowed the KRI forces, known as Peshmarga, to pass through Turkey and go to Kobane city in the Autonomous Administration of North and East of Syria (AANES) to help their Kurdish brethren against ISIS attack on the city. Since its foundation in 1923, those Kurdish forces were the very first foreign army convoy to pass through Turkish soil.

 Iran on the other hand, opened three international gates on its borders with the KRI. More on this subject will be provided in the section on Iran-KRI relations.

Methodology

 I will divide this paper into three sections. The first section will provide a short historical background of Iraqi Kurds' relations with Iran and Turkey before Iraqi Kurdistan was granted federal status after 2003 and became a unified de facto state. In this section I will briefly focus on how Iran and Turkey established ties with Kurdish political parties. Those relations still play significant roles in the KRI relations with the two countries.

 The second section covers the KRI's efforts of state building, and its relations with Iran and Turkey from 2003 until 2014. Throughout this period, the KRI mainly focused on remaining within Iraq and rebuilding the state based on democratic principles that provide Kurdish rights. During the same period of time, the KRI relations with Turkey were revolutionized. For the first time in the history, Turkey recognized the Kurdish entity in northern Iraq and interacted with it as a state.

 The last section focuses on the dramatic change in the KRI's rhetoric and actions between 2014 and 2017. For the first time in its history, the KRI only practically stepped towards independence between these four years. This section elaborates on how the 2017 referendum damaged the KRI and its relations with Turkey and Iran. The section then will be followed by a brief update on how the KRI shifted its attitude back to focusing on the RA and gave up on its claims of IR.

 Other than secondary data, I heavily relied on speeches, interviews and writings of the Kurdish elites as the main source of data of this paper. For example, Najmaddin Faraj Ahmad known as Mullah Krekar, the leader of Kurdish Ansar Al-Islam, provides detailed information about the history of Iran in the KRI. Krekar himself was a leader among the Kurdish Islamist groups and witnessed those relations firsthand. I observed the official KRI rhetoric about independence from 1991 until present. I relied on their public speeches, their official media outlets and mouthpieces such as Gulan Magazine, Bas News, Zagros TV, Kurdistan TV, Kurdistan 24 TV, Rudaw TV.

 I also interviewed the founder and the director of the KRG's Department of Foreign Relations (DFR), Falah Mustafa. Mustafa became the director of the DFR (equivalent to minister of foreign affairs) in 2006 and remained in the office until 2019. He was responsible for the KRI's relations with Iran and Turkey.

Analysis

Section I

Pre-2003 era: State building and foreign relations of the Kurdistan Region

To understand the KRI's current relationships with Turkey and Iran it is important to provide a brief historical background of their relations. Before 1991 Iraqi Kurds did not have a territorial political entity. There were merely political parties such as the DKP, PUK, and the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK). During that time, each individual political party conducted their own foreign relations through private and individual channels. They were, however, far more involved with Iran than they were with Turkey.

As a part of its secular, modern and pro-West policy –an ideology known as Kemalism – Turkey minimized relations with the Muslim Word in general. Internally, nationalist Turkish governments for the majority the 20th century denied the existence of any other ethnic group besides Turks within Turkey's territory, including the Kurds. Turkey perceived any attempt by the Kurds living in the neighboring countries towards autonomy or independence as a threat provoking its own Kurdish population. Within this set of ideology, Turkey adopted a denial policy towards Iraqi Kurds as well. "Kurds love to tell the story of how the Turks protested to Egyptian Gamal Abdel Nasser when he started broadcasting some nationalist radio programs in Kurdish. Flirting with the Kurdish nationalists, Nasser responded that since there were no Kurds in Turkey, this shouldn't offend them."[244] Most of Turkey's engagement with Iraq, however, was over the issue of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party also knowns as the PKK.

Iran, in contrast, had long established historical relations with the Iraqi Kurds. Iran had benefitted from the Kurdish insurgencies in Iraq and used them as leverage against Baghdad. Under the Shah, Iran had allowed the flow of weapons through the Iranian soil to Mustafa Barzani's rebellions until Shah's peacemaking with Iraq in 1975, through the Algerian Accord. Even before Ayatollah Khomeini grabs power in 1979 through the Islamic Revolution, PUK's Jalal Talabani sent, Fouad Masum (one of the founders of the PUK and the president of Iraq between 2014-2018) to meet Khomeini in France. Iran under the Islamic Revolution cooperated with the Iraqi Kurds again, especially with the PUK during the Iran-Iraq war between 1980-1988. Most importantly, Iran greatly contributed to the establishment of numerous new Islamic Kurdish political parties in Iraq, such as the IMK, and the Kurdish Hezbollah.

Since there is already much written about Iran's relations and cooperation with the KDP and PUK, here I will provide two examples of Iran's leverage on the Kurdish Islamists. Mullah Krekar, who was a high ranking member of the IMK from 1989 until late 1990s, provides firsthand information about how Iran was influential enough to decide who becomes the leader of the political parties, how Iran divided the Islamists and appointed pro-Iranian Kurds at the leadership.[245] The IMK was first founded in Iran in 1987 when the

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[244] Quil Lawrence. Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood Is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East. Walker Books; First edition (April 1, 2008) p.13

[245] Fatava Krekar YouTube Channel "The betrayal of October 16, the threat from Iranian Shia on Kurdistan, IGK and Ali Bapir Iran's Man". Oct 20, 2018. Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_A3cwbrVTpM

Kurdistan Islamic League Movement (KILM), also known as *Rabita*, united with the leadership of Kurdish diaspora in Iran. However, Krekar claims, Iranian still supported the old Rabita members within the IMK and provoked them against the new leadership of the IMK. Iranians did not trust Omar Abdulazeez, the IMK leader. Abdulazeez had close relations with Fileh Samarrayi, and Iraqi prominent Islamist. Samarrayi was a close friend of King Faisal of Saudi Arabi. Hence Iran never trusted Abdulazeez completely and considered him loyal to the KSA.[246] According to Krekar, Iran especially supported Ali Bapir within the Rabita members, a well-spoken young man at that time.[247] Through Bapir, according to Krekar, Iran pressured Abdulazeez and weakened the IMK.

In 1991 Iraqi Kurds rose up against the central government in Baghdad and took control of their claimed territories. Instead of seceding completely from Iraq, Kurds decided to remain within their mother state. Kurds wanted to show their goodwill and provide a good example of how Kurds can govern their own territories.[248] They started building state institutions, such as the cabinet, parliament, police and security forces. Kurds held their first parliamentary elections in May 1992 where the dominant political parties, the KDP under Massoud Barzani and the PUK under Jalal Talabani, shared the parliament seats equally. They decided not to elect a president and appointed Fuad Masum from PUK as the Prime Minister. According to Jude, the institutions of governance and steps taken towards democracy were under the pressure of the outside forces such as the US.[249]

Iraqi Kurdistan has been heavily relying on the US as a patron state from 1991 until now. In early 1990s the US aided Kurdistan both financially and militarily. The US, with its allies, provided a no-fly zone on the Kurdish north. According to Natali, the foreign aid played a very significant role in establishing the KRI as a de facto state.[250]

Turkey's degree of involvement with Iraqi Kurds also changed after those events. In 1990s, then the Prime Minister Turgut Özal, himself of Kurdish descent,[251] "made an important effort in the early 1990s to improve Turkey's relations with the Iraqi Kurds".[252] "Özal mainly aimed to receive first-hand information about the developments involving the Iraqi Kurds and to secure support of the KDP and PUK in Turkey's struggle against the PKK. During this period, both Barzani and Talabani "were allowed to open their parties' representative offices in Ankara and were granted Turkish diplomatic passports."[253] In

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[246] Krekar , "The betrayal of October 16…"

[247] Krekar, "The betrayal of October 16…"

[248] Falah Mustafa. Phone Interview with Author. April 21, 2020

[249] Johannes Jude. "Contesting borders? The formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's de facto state". *International Affairs* 93: 4 (2017) 847–863; doi: 10.1093/ia/iix125

[250] Denise Natali. "The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq" Syracuse University Press (August 6, 2010)

[251] Simon Scott Plummer. "Homeless on a grand scale" The Telegraph. Dec 2006. Link: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3657402/Homeless-on-a-grand-scale.html

[252] Özlem Kayhan Pusane. "Two years after the independence referendum: are Turkey-KRG relations normalizing?" Turkish Policy Quarterly. September 9, 2019. Link: http://turkishpolicy.com/blog/38/two-years-after-the-independence-referendum-are-turkey-krg-relations-normalizing

[253] Pusane. "Two years after…"

1993 Özal died while still in office. Hence Turkey's friendly ties with the Iraqi Kurds ended with him.

Once the KDP and PUK engaged in a civil war in 1994 until 1998, the nature of Iran and Turkey's relations with the Iraqi Kurds changed. Each of these two countries backed one of those two political parties using them as pawns to create buffer zones in northern Iraq. Sometimes Iran and Turkey directly participated in the KDP-PUK fratricide. According to Hoshyar Zebari, then a leader of the KDP, Iranian forces themselves used to intensively bombard the KDP positions and used helicopters to ferry troops behind them.[254] However, "Dr Latif Rashid, a spokesman for the PUK, denied that his party was receiving Iranian support".[255] Iran, however, also supported the KDP against the PUK at times, to keep the balance between the two political parties.[256]

In 1998 the PUK and KDP signed a truce and ended their four-year bloody war. However, Turkish troops still remained in Bamarni Base, 15 miles south of the Turkish-Iraqi border. Although their numbers are unknown, it is estimated that the bases host some 2,000 troops and several dozen tanks.[257]

Iran, on the other hand, kept influencing the Iraqi Kurdish political games directly through small fraction and individuals. Krekar, who is now in Italian jail on charges of terrorism, illustrates how Iran uses fractions, individuals and political parties against each other to control the Kurdish political parties. In 1997 the IMK united with the Islamic Renaissance Movement IRM (Bizutnaway Nahdhay Islami) and changed its name to Islamic Unity Movement, IUM (Bizutnaway Yakbooni Islami). However, the fraction of the previous IRM were still called "Nahda". According to Krekar, Iran encouraged Nahda within the IUM to support Bapir. This way, Bapir's wing within the IUM became more powerful. Krekar further argues that Iran's contact with the Kurdish Islamists was through an intelligence agent nicknamed Norian, under the direct supervision of Mohammad Mirmohammadi, the presidential chief of staff during the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Norian met with the Nahda group in Tawela Mosque, near Halabja, and told them to reach an agreement and separate from the IUM.[258] The Nahda group sent a letter to Tehran through Norian and agreed to separate from the IUM. "I was sitting with Ali Abdulazeez [the IUM leader at that time] in a hotel room," Krekar recalls, Norian came in to the room and showed Abdulazeez a paper and said: "Nahda group signed this form and want Ali Bapir to become their leader, the IUM will have to disintegrate."[259] Bapir then parted ways with the IUM and founded Islamic Group of Kurdistan (IGK) in May 2001. Krekar then mentions some money without referring to its source or the amount, that Iran

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[254] Patrick Cockburn. "Iran 'supplying arms to fuel Kurdish civil war'. Independent. August 22, 1996. Link: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/iran-supplying-arms-to-fuel-kurdish-civil-war-1310854.html
[255] Cockburn. "Iran 'supplying arms…"
[256] Cockburn. "Iran 'supplying arms…"
[257] Giorgio Cafiero. "The Dreams and Dilemmas of Iraqi Kurdistan" Institute For Policy Studies. January 24, 2013. https://ips-dc.org/the_dreams_and_dilemmas_of_iraqi_kurdistan/
[258] Krekar, "The betrayal of October 16…"
[259] Ibid

wanted to provide the Islamists through then the PUK leader Talabani. According to Krekar, both, Bapir and Abdulazeez asked Talabani for the money. However, Talabani who was known for good sense humor, responded: "I'm just an accountant, Iran tells me 'pay the money to this Ali (Abdulazzez) or that Ali (Bapir), and I follow the order".[260]

Then Krekar himself defected from the IUM in 2001 and created Ansar Al-Islam. Although Iran was acting as the parent state of the PUK and has been supporting the political party to this day, Iran still wanted to use Ansar as a card to threaten the PUK. In 2003 the PUK attacked Ansar with the support of the US in the little known "Operation Viking Hummer". Krekar claims that the Iranian intelligence met him and told him that "every time Turkey attacks the PKK, we Iranians withdraw from the border and allow the PKK to cross and take refuge inside Iran to protect themselves. If you and your men want to benefit from the same experience, once the PUK and the US attack you, you can cross the border and come into Iran."[261] Krekar claims that he refused the offer because he and his group were Sunnis and did not want to submit to the Shia Iran.

Section II

2003-2014: Regional Acceptance and the Golden Era of the KRI

Although Kurds enjoyed autonomy between 1991-2003, there was not a unified Kurdish political entity. The KDP had a local administration governing Erbil and Duhok provinces, while the PUK controlled Sulaymaniya. A unified administration as a de facto state emerged only after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. From 2003 to 2014 the KRI pursued a double-edged policy. On the one hand, Kurdish leadership promoted a pro-Iraqi unity rhetoric and pursued RA strategy. Barzani and Talabani "both realistically denied any claims for independence, opting instead for federalism in a post-Saddam democratic Iraq".[262] On the other hand, the KRI worked on building a state like polity, built state institutions, promoted Kurdish national identity, established strong diplomatic relations with foreign countries, and most importantly appeased Turkey. Since the KRI pursued the RA instead of IR throughout this period, it enjoyed its most prosperous time and lived its golden era.

The US invasion of Iraq 2003 annihilated all state institutions including the Iraqi army. Kurds were hoping that their leadership will finally secede from the failed state of Iraq. However, "Kurdish leaders, well aware of the practical impediments to independence" writes Galbraith, repeated "a mantra that the Americans want to hear: Iraq should be democratic, federal, pluralistic and united."[263] With that mindset, not only the Kurdish leadership refused secede from Iraq, they rather worked hard to rebuild a democratic federal state. In summer 2004, Condoleezza Rice spoke "at a meeting in

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[260] Ibid

[261] Krekar, "The betrayal of October 16…"

[262] Michael M. Gunter. "Why Kurdish Statehood is Unlikely". Middle East Policy Council. 2004. Link: https://mepc.org/journal/kurds-iraq-0

[263] Peter W. Galbraith. "As Iraqis Celebrate, the Kurds Hesitate". The New York Times. Feb. 1, 2005. Link: https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/01/opinion/as-iraqis-celebrate-the-kurds-hesitate.html

Washington about how impressed she was with the Kurdish commitment to the building a new, unified Iraq."[264]

The RA policy was collectively agreed upon by then the two key political leaders of the KDP and PUK. The power in both ruling parties was centralized in the hands of two leaders: Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. Even when the rest of the two political cadres could not hide their desire for independence, they still had to echo what their leaders preached. The current Kurdish Iraqi president Barham Salih, who then was the deputy of Talabani, said: "No Kurd can dissuade himself of the right to self-determination, but history and geography have been cruel to my people, and we know the possibility of a Kurdish state in Iraq is a very distant one. The tangible thing for us is to work for a federal democracy and be a full-fledged Iraqi citizen."[265] Even Masoud Barzani, "while denouncing claims of statehood, said in 2005: "I am certain there will be an independent Kurdistan, and I hope to see it in my lifetime."[266]

Some Kurdish NGOs and civilians took the matter into their hands and held two independence referenda "in February 2004 and again in January 2005 almost unanimously called for independence despite the opposition of the main Kurdish leaders, who argued that independence would not be practical given strong regional opposition."[267] While the KRI "maintains that the referendum was entirely a private initiative, the voting was greatly facilitated by a younger generation of officials, who believe[d] their elders have already made too many concessions to the unity of Iraq."[268]

Kurdish leaders convinced their people that an independent Kurdistan would be more harmful than being useful. They also assured the worrying neighbors that the KRI will not secede from Iraq. "I tell this to my Turkish brothers" Jalal Talabani told the Turkish Sabah Daily in an interview in 2009, "Don't be afraid of Kurdish independence. To stay within Iraq is in the interest of the Kurdish people in an economic, cultural and political sense."[269] Talabani went a far as saying that "Kurdish nationalists' dream of a Great Kurdistan was "a dream in poems". He said his views were shared by Iraq's autonomous government."[270]

The KRI, for the first time in its history with Iraq, was granted federalism in the new constitution of Iraq in 2005. The KDP and PUK unified their separate administration in 2006, to large extent, and created the KRG, with its capital in Erbil. Interestingly, according to Nazim Dabbagh, the KRI representative in Iran, the KRI federalism and every

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[264] Galbraith. "As Iraqis Celebrate…"

[265] Sabrina Tavernise. "AFTER THE WAR: POLITICS; Returning to Iraq, Few Kurds Want to Be Part of It". The New York Times. May 25, 2003. Link: https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/25/world/after-the-war-politics-returning-to-iraq-few-kurds-want-to-be-part-of-it.html

[266] Galbraith. "As Iraqis Celebrate…"

[267] Michael Gunter. "Unrecognized De Facto States in World Politics: The Kurds." Brown Journal of World Affairs. 2015

[268] https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/01/opinion/as-iraqis-celebrate-the-kurds-hesitate.html

[269] Reuters. "Kurdish independence just a dream, Talabani tells Turkey". MARCH 16, 2009. Link: https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLG519166

[270] Reuters. "Kurdish independence…"

small detail of it was written and carved out in Tehran by Qasem Soleimani himself",[271] the former commander of Iranian Quds Forces. According to Dabbagh, Iranians even supported Kurdish nationalism in Iraq in 2003 so that Kurds deemphasize their Sunni identity and hence prevent the unification of Kurds with Sunni Arabs.[272]

According to Kane et al, there are usually two incentives behind federalism: "coming-together" and "holing-together".[273] "Coming-together" form of federalism, Kane et al write, is to establish a federal country comprised of previously independent polities. In that case, usually more power is granted to the federal entities and the power in the center is significantly decentralized[274]. Whereas in the case of "holding together" federalism, various entities within a unified state are granted the status of federalism in order to satisfy their needs and maintain the unity of the state.

In the case of Iraq, Kane et al argue, the federal rights given under "coming-together" form were given to the KRI. The KRI already enjoyed autonomous rights since 1991. Therefore, although the status of a federal region was granted to the KRI as a way to "hold Iraq together", Iraq's new constitution let the KRI keep all of its achievements it enjoyed since 1991 and many more. From the consolidation of the KRI's federal status in the Iraqi constitution in 2005 until 2017, the KRI acted fully independent from Baghdad conducting its own foreign politics, and even drawing physical borders with the rest of Iraq.

Kurdish elites put their independence claims on hold (temporarily) claiming that they do wish to remain inside a unified Iraq if their rights are granted within the new constitution. This way, they enjoyed full control over their region and its resources, while also benefitting from the natural resources of the rest of Iraq.

Some outside factors also bolstered the KRI's power and further isolated it from the rest of Iraq. After the invasion of Iraq, Howard argues, the US pursued its policy of promoting "ethnocracy" just like it did in Bosnia.[275] By diving power onto Iraqi population based on their ethno-sectarian identity, the US bolstered the social division among Iraq's three main components, Shia, Sunni, and Kurds. The outside forces provided the KRI with significant help. The KRI distanced itself from the rest of Iraq through digging moats and 400 kilometers long trenches, Dawood claims[276]. According to Dawood, these trenches and moats were being supervised by the coalition forces such as US, Britain, Germany and France, where their engineers provide logistic support to the KRI.

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[271] Nazim Dabbagh. Interview with Ziryan Haji. "Nazim Dabbagh: Kurdistan Region's Federalism has been carved out in Iran by haji Qasem". Rudaw Media Network. January 21st, 2020. Link: https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/interview/21012020
[272] Dabbagh. Interview with Ziryan Haji. "Nazim Dabbagh: Kurdistan Region's Federalism…"
[273] Sean Kane, Joost Hiltermann, and Raad Alkadiri, Iraq's Federalism Quandary" (The National Interest 2012). P.22
[274] Kane et al. Iraq's Federalism…
[275] Lise Morje Howard. "US Foreign Policy Habits in Ethnic Conflict." International Studies Quarterly (2015) 59, 721–734
[276] Ismaeel Dawood. "Moats, Walls, and the Future of Iraqi National Identity." IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 28 - OCTOBER 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-9368-008-0

In 2011 a financial advisor named Ali Khedery warned the American oil company ExxonMobil that Iraq under then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki "was moving toward dictatorship and civil war. Iraq was likely to align itself more closely with Iran, which will "have an adverse impact on U.S. companies."[277] Khedery then suggested the KRI as an alternative. "Saddled with a low-paying oilfield in Iraq" the giant oil company's CEO Rix Tillerson decided to make a deal with the KRG.[278] "Only, that is regarded as illegal in Baghdad, which reserves for itself the right to negotiate all oil deals across the land. Baghdad threatened military action should ExxonMobil actually commit a drill bit to the soil."[279] ExxonMobil, however, breached international laws and Iraqi constitution by unilaterally signing a billion-dollar oil contract with the KRG despite Baghdad's objection. The move by ExxonMobil persuaded the KRI leaders that having the world's largest oil company on their soil not only motivates other companies to invest in the KRI, but it would also be an incentive for the US to support the KRI's independence in the future to protect the oil company's interests.[280] Fuad Hussein, then chief of staff to Kurdistan's president said: "Part of the process of building our region has to do, of course, with dealing with oil, signing contracts, negotiations with various countries, the Exxon deal validated smaller oil deals Kurdistan had already signed and was "a big victory for us".[281] "The KRG cannot dip into World Bank funds itself unless its goes through Baghdad," Zaman writes, "But rubbing shoulders with international financial institutions is clearly a useful exercise in state-building."[282]

According to Kane et al the KRG has signed independent contract with more than 25 oil companies.[283] While the KRG kept the oil revenue of the region exclusively for itself, it also received additional 17% of the Iraqi national budget.

Building State Institutions and Promoting Kurdish Identity

According to Gunter, the KRI has progressed dramatically towards democracy.[284] He states that there are civil society organization, free media, and freedom of speech. "The KRG currently has many of the trappings of an independent state: its own president, prime minister, and parliament; its own flag and national anthem; its own army that even prevents Baghdad's army from entering the Kurdish region; its own international airports and educational system in which few even bother to learn Arabic anymore; and its own stamp entered into the passports of visitors."[285]

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[277] Dmitry Zhdannikov, Isabel Coles, Ned Parker. "Special Report: How Exxon helped make Iraqi Kurdistan". Reuters. December 3, 2014. Link: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurdistan-specialrepor/special-report-how-exxon-helped-make-iraqi-kurdistan-idUSKCN0JH18720141204
[278] Steve LeVine. "The little-known man pulling the strings for ExxonMobil in Baghdad". Quartz. February 15, 2013. Link: https://qz.com/54422/the-little-known-man-pulling-the-strings-for-exxonmobil-in-baghdad/
[279] LeVine. "The little-known man…"
[280] Zhdannikov et al. "Special Report: How…"
[281] Zhdannikov et al. "Special Report: How…"
[282] Zaman. Amberin., (2016) From Tribe to Nation: Iraqi Kurdistan on the Cusp of Statehood. Wilson Center. Middle East Program Occasional Paper Series. P.15
[283] Kane et al. "Iraq's Federalism Quandary…" p.21
[284] Gunter. "Unrecognized De Facto…"
[285] Gunter. "Unrecognized De Facto…" p.170

The leaders of the KRI and other unrecognized states in general attempt to abide by internationally accepted norms to prove to the international community that they are good state builders, peaceful and democratic, according to Berg and Molder[286]. The KRI wants to present a democratic and successful model of statecraft to the international community and tell them that the entity has been successful in building a "peace-loving" state and hence it deserves admission into the United Nations (UN). The second item of article four of the UN's Charter states that "Membership in the United Nations is open to all other peace-loving states which accept the obligations contained in the present Charter and, in the judgment of the Organization, are able and willing to carry out these obligations."[287] Engaging in wars and violence will undermine the international image of the KRI and will disqualify it from being a potential independent state.

According to Zaman, the KRI specially encourages strengthening diplomatic ties with foreign countries. It has 14 representative offices abroad, including the US and the European Union (EU), and hosts consulates and representatives of 40 countries and international governmental institutions such EU, including consulates of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The KRI pays special attentions to its image in international community by abiding with international laws and norms. The KRG has established an independent intuition called "International Advocacy Coordinator" run by Dindar Zebari. In Kurdish, however, the name of the institution is translated as "Institution of Responding to International Reports". The task of this institution is responding to international reports written by foreign actors, mostly Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, especially those that at critical of the KRG's domestic politics such as human rights abuse, violating minority rights, and oppressing freedom of speech.

The KRI promotes Kurdish national identity to foster national unity. Between 2003 and 2014 the KRI leadership used to endorse an ethno-nationalism identity against Baghdad in order to consolidate Kurdish rights within a unified Iraq. The KRI emboldened its ethnic identity to differentiate itself from the rest of Iraq. That way it can justify its future separation demands by emphasizing on its unique identity among Arab, Shia, Sunni identities. If Kurds activate their Sunni identity, they will be depicted as any other Sunni groups in Iraq and their demands for separation based on their ethnic identity will be baseless.

The KRI promoted Kurdish ethnic identity through various channels such as education, ethno-symbolic means, propagandas and fearmongering, as well as "Othering". Sherko Kirmanj, a Kurdish writer, argues that the KRI relies extensively on schools to promote national identity.[288] According to Zaman, although there are two different dialects spoken in the KRI, Kirmanji mainly spoken in KDP controlled areas while Sorani is spoken in PUK controlled areas, the KDP allowed Sorani to be the education language to keep the

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[286] Berg and Molder. "Who is entitled to…" also see Nina Caspersen. "Degrees of legitimacy: Ensuring internal and external support in the absence of recognition". (Geoforum 66, 2015)

[287] United Nations. The UN Charter. Last accessed March 4th, 2019. Link: https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-ii/index.html

[288] Sherko Kirmanj. "Kurdish History Textbooks: Building a Nation-State within a Nation-State". The Middle East Journal, Volume 68, Number 3, Summer 2014, pp. 367-384

unity of the Kurds.[289] The KRG's Ministry of Education teaches students, in Kurdish language, the symbolic components of Kurdish culture and history, such as Newroz (Kurdish new year), Kurdish historical figures, and the atrocities that the Kurds witnessed under the various Iraqi regimes throughout the 20th century.

KRI-Turkey relations: from foes to allies

Turkey continued a hostile policy towards the KRI until 2008-9. Many domestic factors, from within Turkey and within the KRI, changed this enmity to a strong alliance from 2009 until 2017. On the KRI side, Kurdish leadership insisted on showing goodwill and convincing Turkey that the KRI will not declare independence. The KRI also eliminated Turkey's security concerns and ensured Turkey that they will now allow the PKK to use the KRI territory as a launching pad to attack Turkey from. The KRI leadership worked harder on their relations with Turkey thatn with Iran. According to the former Director of KRI's Foreign Relations Department, that is because Turkey is close to the West and the US, Turkey's geopolitical strategy is more important than Iran's, and finally, Turkey is industrialized and more developed than Iran and hence Kurds are more attracted to the Turkish products than Iranian products.[290]

On the Turkish side, several factors contributed to the enhanced relations with the KRI. Ankara pursued zero problem policy with its neighbors. Turkey "with its growing energy demands and lack of indigenous sources of energy, needed the KRI oil.[291] And Turkey perceived the KRI's booming economy as a potential business partner.

On February 21, 2008, Turkish Armed Forces brought 10,000 troops to its shared border with the KRI. Although Ankara claimed that the incursion was purely against the outlawed Kurdish separatist PKK, then-the President of the KRI, Massoud Barzani, saw his newly founded federal region in northern Iraq as the main target of the attack. With pressure from Washington, Turkish troops withdrew shortly.

The KRI had attempted to build good relations with Ankara because the landlocked region needed a gate towards the outside world. However, due to decades long hostility that had shaped the public opinion of both sides, Ankara and Erbil hesitated from stepping forward.

In May 2009 Ahmet Davutoglu became Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs. He constructed a Zero-Problem foreign policy for Turkey. Davutoglu envisioned a Neo-Ottoman Empire which had to start with building friendly ties with all regional actors. That, of course, included the KRI.

In 2009, some Kurdish and Turkish NGOs held a platform, called Abant, in Erbil bringing together approximately hundred Turkish and Kurdish journalists, intellectuals, and academicians. The same platform was held later in Turkey's largest Kurdish city, Diyarbakir. Choosing intellectuals was based on their major influence on public opinion through media. Journalists and intellectuals are also a link between the society and the elites. Attendants of these two platforms had the chance, for the first time in the history, to peacefully discuss the Turkey-KRI relations. One of the outcomes of the platform was that

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[289] Zaman. "From Tribe to Nation…"
[290] Falah Mustafa. Interview with Author. April 21, 2020
[291] Cafiero. "The Dreams and Dilemmas.."

both sides agreed on ending hostile propaganda towards one another through media. Prior to that, the Turkish media continuously portrayed a bad image of the KRI and encouraged the Turkish public to pressure the government to wage a war against the KRI. Intellectuals from both sides decided to ask their governments to open consulates and representative offices in each other's capitals. Within less than one year, this suggestion became a reality.

Mümtaz'er Türköne, a member of the executive board of the Abant Platform and the spokesman of the Erbil meeting described the platform as "the most meaningful meeting in its short history.[292] The purpose was to improve relations between two societies. The meeting was successful beyond expectations and managed to build a very strong bridge between two groups".[293] Abant platform was one of the examples that accelerated Davutoglu's planned friendship with the KRI.

Three years after Davutoglu became Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, on March 29, 2011, then-the Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan became the first Turkish leader to visit Erbil, the capital of the KRI. During that visit, Erdogan opened the first ever General Turkish Consulate in Erbil and the Erbil International Airport built by a Turkish company. From then, Turkey-KRI relations have improved dramatically. While the Turks used to perceive the KRI as a major threat to Turkey's national security and its territorial integrity, the KRI became Turkey's "best ally"[294]. As Turkey's top third trade partner in the world, more than half of the companies investing in the KRI are Turkish.[295] As a gate towards the outside world, the landlocked KRI exports its oil and gas through Turkey, allowing the KRI to become economically independent from Baghdad.

The shift in KRG-Turkey relationship made Turkey a more effective parent state of the KRI enabling the KRI to benefit from its oil and become financially independent. The KRG built Ministry of Natural Resources and through its ties with Ankara as a parent states, the KRG relied less on the foreign aid and more on its internal revenue. "In 2013 the KRI became Turkey's second largest trading partner in 2013."[296]

Table 1. depicts the difference between the number of Turkish companies investing in the KRI in 2009 and 2013. As shown in the table, the number of companies tripled in four years.

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[292] Mümtaz'er Türköne. "Abant Platform's Arbil Meeting: Future of Peace". Fethullah Gülen's Official Web Site. 2009. Retrieved date 04/15/5016 from http://en.fgulen.com/press-room/columns/3228-abant-platforms-arbil-meeting-future-of-peace

[293] Türköne. (2009). "Abant Platform's

[294] Mustafa Akyol. "Turkey's Best Ally: The Kurds". The New York Times. 2014. Retrieved date 04/15/5016 from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/23/opinion/turkeys-best-ally-the-kurds.html?_r=0

[295] Soner Cagaptay, Christina Fidan, Ege Sacikara. "Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth". The Washington Institute, 2015. Retrieved date 04/15/5016 from http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-and-the-krg-an-undeclared-economic-commonwealth

[296] Cafiero. "The Dreams and Dilemmas…"

Year	Number of companies
2009	485 companies
2010	730 companies
2012	1,023 companies
2013	1,500 companies

Table 1. Turkish Companies Operating in Iraq Including the KRI[297].

Within a few years, Turkey and the KRI became so interdependent that neither side had the desire to lose the billions of dollars in exchange for political purposes. Table 2. shows the Turkish export rate to the KRI between 2007 and 2013 increasing from $1.4 billion to $8 billion. "Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the Region [KRG] has been predominantly sourced from Turkey and the largest external trading partner for the Region is Turkey".[298] "If Iraqi Kurdistan were an independent country it would rank among Turkey's top ten trading partners" notes Selcen, the First Turkish Consul General in Erbil.[299] Table 3. illustrates how the KRG, within six years has jumped from being Turkey's 9th export destination in 2007 to the 3rd in 2013.
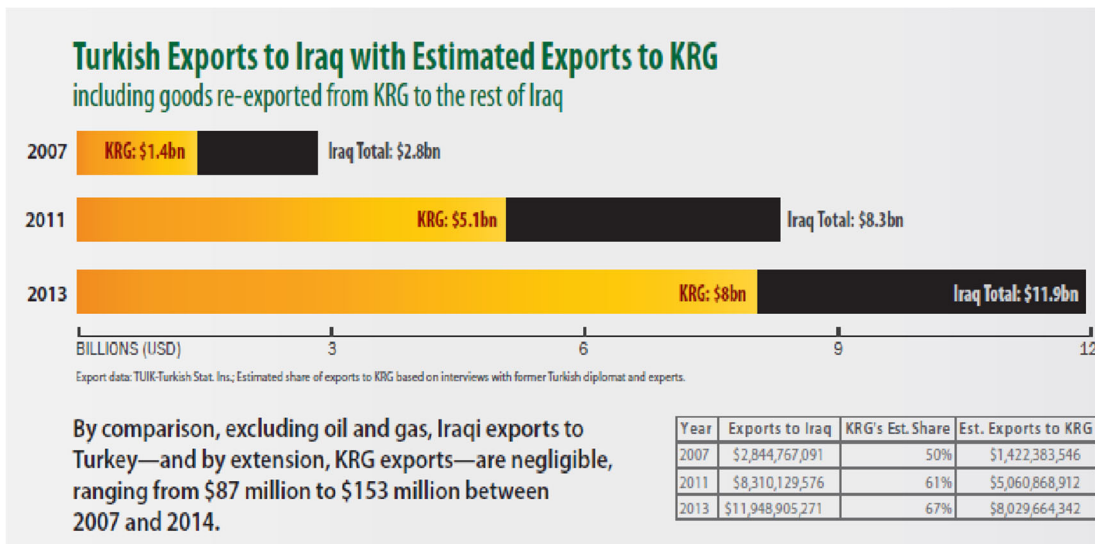
Table 2. Turkish Exports to Iraq including KRI[300]

[297] Christina Bache Fidan. "Turkish Business in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq" Turkish Policy Quarterly. March 7, 2016. Link: http://turkishpolicy.com/article/790/turkish-business-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq
[298] Zaman. "From Tribe to Nation…"
[299] Zaman. "From Tribe to Nation…" p.19
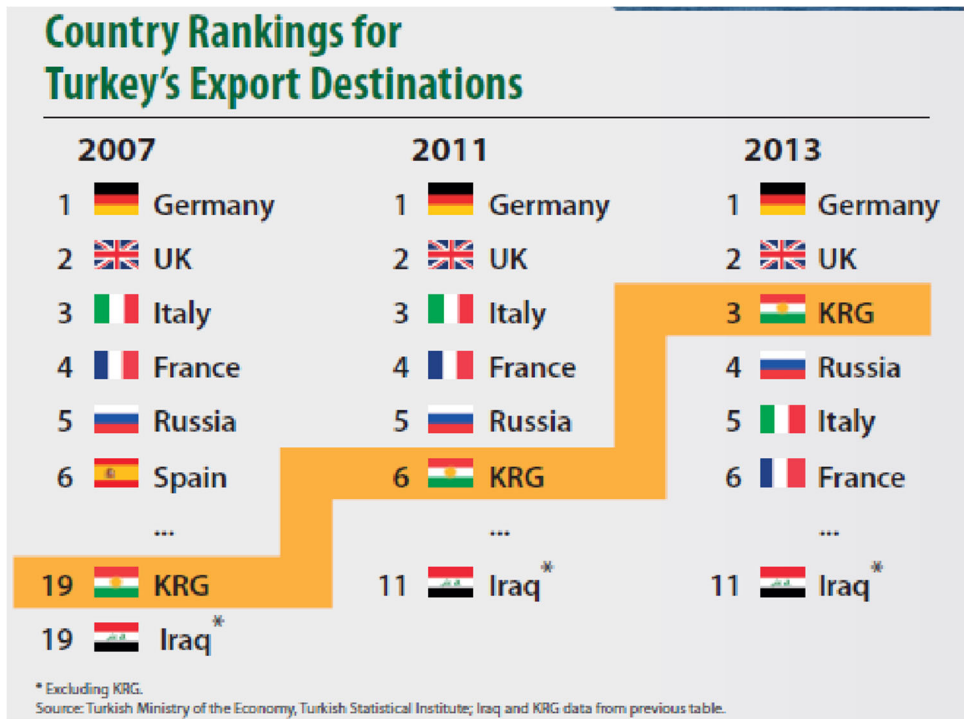[300] Cagaptay et al. "Turkey and the KRG…"

Country Rankings for Turkey's Export Destinations

2007	2011	2013
1 Germany	1 Germany	1 Germany
2 UK	2 UK	2 UK
3 Italy	3 Italy	3 KRG
4 France	4 France	4 Russia
5 Russia	5 Russia	5 Italy
6 Spain	6 KRG	6 France
...	...	...
19 KRG	11 Iraq[*]	11 Iraq[*]
19 Iraq[*]		

[*] Excluding KRG.
Source: Turkish Ministry of the Economy, Turkish Statistical Institute; Iraq and KRG data from previous table.

Table 3. Country Rankings for Turkey's Export Destinations[301]

The KRI has "the visa-free regime for Turkish citizens who wished to stay in the KRG for under 15 days, Turkish companies [are] able to send workers of all skill levels to the KRG without foreplanning, without completing any government paperwork, and at a relatively low cost."[302] Türköne described the KRI-Turkey relations at that time and wrote: "Today, the Turkey that sees an autonomous government in northern Iraq as the beginning of the Greater Kurdistan ideal and that tries to get rid of the "separation paranoia" by repressing its own Kurds is being replaced by a Turkey that is integrating northern Iraq with itself in economic and social terms and that respects its own Kurds as equal and dignified citizens".[303]

The-then KRI President Barzani, who until recently "was derided as a cocky tribal upstart who emboldened by U.S. support was accused of plotting against Turkey",[304] was being received by Turkish officials on the red carpet. While using the name "Kurdistan" was illegal in Turkey, Selcen, had "no hang-ups about calling the Kurdish region "Iraqi Kurdistan" or Barzani its 'President.' Until recently he would have been accused, perhaps even prosecuted, for doing so on charges of inciting ethnic separatism."[305]

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[301] Cagaptay et al. "Turkey and the KRG…"
[302] Fidan. "Turkish Business in the Kurdistan…" p.2
[303] Türköne. "Abant Platform's
[304] Zaman. "From Tribe to Nation…"
[305] Zaman. "From Tribe to Nation…"

KRI-Iran relations

Unlike Turkey, Iran never denied the existence of Kurds. Due to the ethnic and cultural relationships between Persians and Kurds, Iran had already recognized Kurdish cultural rights within and outside its borders. As mentioned before, Iraqi Kurds had used Iran as a safe haven against Baghdad. Thus, after 2003 Iran was quicker than Turkey in establishing diplomatic and trade relations with the KRI.

The KRI leadership welcomed Iran's rapprochement and eased Tehran's security concerns. However, the US-Iran rivalry in the region usually puts the between a rock and a hard place. While Iran is a strategic neighbor, establish full-fledged relations with Iran might anger the U.S.[306] Nevertheless, the KRI has been able to enjoy good relations with its neighbor for the majority of the time.

"Iran seeks to counter the impact of international economic sanctions and Erbil pursues partners with leverage over Baghdad, the KRG and Iran's expanded political, commercial, and energy ties make sense from a geostrategic standpoint."[307] At the same time, Iran wants a relatively strong KRI which Iran can threaten Baghdad with. Iran then uses the PUK to threaten the (KDP dominated) KRI, it uses the IGK to threaten the PUK, according to Krekar Iran also uses pro-Iranian individuals within the IGK to threaten Ali Bapir, the emir of the IGK.[308]

Iran opened two consulate offices in Erbil and Sulaymaniya. In return, "the KRG's representative office in Tehran serves as a de facto embassy."[309] The KRI shares approximately 450 kilometers (279 miles) of border with Iran. There are three internationally recognized gates along the border, Bashmakh, Parwezkhan and Haji Omran, and a few unofficial border gates that Erbil and Tehran have signed an agreement to make official. Although the KRI was legally not authorized to open those three international border gates, Soleimani personally assisted the KRI bypass those legal hinders and opened the gates.[310] Due to the trade conducted through those gates the "Iran-KRG trade increased more than 25 percent during early 2012."[311]

According to Entessar "neither Iran nor the KRG publishes reliable statistics on the volume of trade between the two sides, nor are there reliable statistics on Iranian direct investments in Iraqi Kurdistan. Another complicating factor in providing reliable statistics on Iran-KRG trade is that a significant amount of cross-border trade is in the form of informal or illicit trade."[312] Although there are no official and accurate statistics on the

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[306] Falah Mustafa. Interview with Author. April 21, 2020

[307] Cafiero. "The Dreams and Dilemmas…"

[308] Krekar. ""The betrayal of October 16…"

[309] Nader Entessar. "Uneasy Neighbors: Iran and the Kurdish Regional Government." Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies Vol. 41, No. 2, Winter 2018. P. 74

[310] Nazim Dabbagh. Interview with Ziryan Haji. "Nazim Dabbagh: Kurdish businessman has bought poisonous gas from Iran for the sake of $50.". Rudaw Media Network. January 29th, 2020. Link:https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/interview/28012020

[311] Cafiero. "The Dreams and Dilemmas…"

[312] Entessar. "Uneasy Neighbors…"

Iran-KRI illicit trade either, "judging based on the ongoing discoveries of smuggled goods and hard currencies, the volume must be in the hundreds of millions of dollars."[313]

Some sources estimated the trade volume between the KRI and Iran as \$8 billion in 2014.[314] With the official and unofficial trades between the two sides, "Iran represents the Kurdish region's second largest trading partner after Turkey."[315] Before 2017, "the daily volume of crude trucked to Iran stood at 50,000 barrels per day."[316] In 2014 "Tehran and Erbil agreed to boost their energy ties when Iran agreed to build a major gas pipeline to Iraqi Kurdistan to fuel power stations with Iranian gas, and another pipeline to transport fuel to Iran from Iraqi Kurdistan."[317] The pipelines were expected to increase the volume to 250,000 barrels per day.[318] "By late 2015, some 100 million cubic meters of gas had been injected to a new trans-national pipeline along the Kurdish border for use by both Kurdish town and villages in Iran as well as for transport to Iraqi Kurdistan."[319]

Other than the trade of goods, there is also "significant cross-border tourism activity, including health tourism in both directions, as well as extensive collaboration between security forces on both sides."[320]

There is security cooperation between the KRI and Iran. Similar to the KRI's deal with Ankara to ease the PKK's threat on Turkey, the KRI assured Iran that it will not allow the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), Komeleh, and the Free Life Party (PJAK) attack Iran from the KRI territory.[321] To that end, Talabani himself made an agreement with Tehran.[322] However, Tehran still uses other political parties within the KRI to make sure that the PUK remains under Iranian control. To do so, Mullah Krekar argues, Tehran empowers the IGK.[323]

According to Krekar, who has long and personal experience with Islamists of the KRI, Tehran directly supports the IGK and uses it as a card against the PUK.[324] Based on Krekar's words Bapir himself does not want to fully submit to Iranians. However, Krekar argues, Bapir is surrounded by pro-Iranians whom Krekar calls "Iranists". Those Kurdish Iranists who Krekar claims to know them personally, conduct the secret businesses between the IGK and Tehran. Iran uses those same individuals to pressure Bapir. For example,

[313] Financial Tribune. "Evaluating Economic Impact of Shifting Iran-KRG Relations." October 20, 2017. Link: https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-business-and-markets/74557/evaluating-economic-impact-of-shifting-iran-krg

[314] Financial Tribune. "Evaluating Economic Impact…"

[315] Financial Tribune. "Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan Look to Bolster Trade". February 21, 2018. Link: https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/82326/iran-iraqi-kurdistan-look-to-bolster-trade?utm_campaign=more-like-this

[316] Financial Tribune. "Evaluating Economic Impact…"

[317] Entessar. "Uneasy Neighbors:…"

[318] Financial Tribune. "Evaluating Economic Impact…"

[319] Entessar. "Uneasy Neighbors:…" p. 78

[320] Financial Tribune. "Evaluating Economic Impact…"

[321] Nazim Dabbagh. Interview with Ziryan Haji. "Nazim Dabbagh: Kurdistan Region's Federalism…"

[322] Ibid

[323] Krekar. "The betrayal of October 16…"

[324] Ibid

Krekar continues, the head of the IGK's fraction in the Kurdistan parliament used to be Marwan Galali, a Salafist. Krekar argues that under the pressure of Iran, the IGK had to replace Galali with Soran Omar. Omar is a known for his harsh critiques of the PUK and KDP leadership. Krekar claims that an IGK member had contacted Krekar and told him that the leadership of the IGK gave him eight Iraqi citizenship cards and asked him to illegally cast eight votes for Omar.

There are others in the KRI who also claim that the Iran faked votes for the IGK to weaken other political Islamist groups. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the KRI's three Islamist parties, IUK, IMK and IGK decided to unite under a coalition called "Islah" (reform). Krekar argues that Iran pressured the IGK not to partake in the coalition to avoid the formation of a Sunni front within the KRI. Eventually the IGK ended up participating in the elections alone. Yet, the IGK's votes increased dramatically, while the IUK and IMK lost half of their seats. The leader of the IMK, Irfan Ali Azeez, claims that "a hidden hand" prevented the unification of the Kurdish Islamists.[325] He also claims that the outcomes of the 2018 Iraqi Parliamentary election were purposefully changed. "In Halabja the Islah Coalition won over 23,000 votes, yet it was reduced to 3000 votes, and instead 23,000 votes were awarded to another political party," by which Azeez means the IGK. Azeez's proof is that the IMK and IUK are political parties and have the list of their members which only in Hakabja is well over 20,000. Hence, according to the official results of the elections, only 15% of the IUK and IMK members voted for their own candidates.

Ali Bapir refuses these allegations and argues that his IGK does not have direct relations with Iran.[326] But at the same time, Bapir says that his political party interacts with state and non-state actors based on the context. Each actor has a group of characteristics and the IGK treats them based on those characteristics. For example, according tp Bapir, Iran is a Muslim and a neighbor and the IGK treats Iran as such. The PJAK, in contrast, despite their communist ideology, is a Kurdish actor; therefore, Bapir explains, IGK establishes good relations with them based on their common Kurdish identity.[327]

Section II

2014-2017: The pursuit of IR and the end of the KRI's golden era

Until 2014 the Kurdish leadership stuck to their RA strategy. However, from 2014 until 2017 they changed their rhetoric and policy towards IR policy. There were many factors that led to this change. First, when Kurds were granted federalism in Iraq's 2005 constitution, the rights and duties of the KRI were not explicitly stated. That led to the violation of the constitution by both the central government and the KRI. There were numerous unresolved issues between the two parties such as distribution of natural resources, disputed territories, peshmarga salaries, and the control of the borders and airports.[328] Second, the ISIS had weakened the Iraqi government and its army, that helped peshmarga to take control of all the territories that the KRI had claimed. Third, the KRI's

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[325] Sharpresss. "Irfan Ali Azeez: the existence and success of Islamists is not allowed." 10/10/2018. Link: https://www.sharpress.net/all-detail.aspx?Jimare=127661
[326] Ali Bapir. Interview with Author. April 14th, 2020
[327] Ibid
[328] Gunter. "Unrecognized De Facto…"

previous RA policy had softened Turkey's and Iran's attitude toward the KRI to the extent that the KRI leadership anticipated the two countries would accept Kurdistan's independence. However, the IR policy brought undesired miseries upon the Kurds that wiped out almost all the accomplishments that the KRI had achieved through the RA strategy.

The disputes between Erbil and Baghdad over the KRI's independent oil export peaked in 2014. Early that year the-then prime minister Nouri Al Maliki cut the KRI's 17% share in Iraq's annual budget. In mid-2014 oil prices dropped dramatically, the KRI lost much of its revenue and relied on $3 billion loan from Turkey, and $350 million from the US. At the same time, ISIS abruptly took control over Mosul and soon expanded its territory to encompassed much of the Sunni areas of mid-Iraq. One and a half million Iraqi internally displaced people flooded to the KRI[329]. All these issues put a heavy burden on the KRI's economy.

With a weak federal army on the ground, Kurdish peshmarga forces easily controlled the disputed territories, including oil-rich Kirkuk and Nineveh plain. These two cities also have extensive number of non-Kurdish ethnic groups such as Turkomans, Arabs and Assyrians. With the intention of independence in mind, the Kurdish leadership changed their strategies of promoting national identity from a pure ethno-nationalism to a more inclusive sense of nationality. For example, prior to 2014 the KRI elites emphasized on, what Natali calls, Kurdishness.[330] After 2014 the Kurdish leadership replaced terms that refer only to Kurds with inclusive terms that incorporated other ethnic groups. Instead of using the term "Kurdish nation", they used "Kurdistani people". Furthermore, changing the Kurdistan flag, with a sun representing Kurds, as well as the national anthem, were also brought up by the KRI elites, academicians, and ethnic minorities in the KRI.

ISIS soon took Kurds by surprise and opened another frontier with the KRI. The terrorist group attacked peshmarga with heavy and modern American weapons that the Iraqi army had abandoned. ISIS expelled Kurdish peshmarga in Sinjar, killing thousands of Kurdish Ezidi minorities and enslaving thousands more. The jihadis also defeated peshmarga in Makhmour and Giwer frontiers south of Erbi. By August 8th, 2014 ISIS was already approaching the KRI capital. Well before Americans push back ISIS fighters with at least one 500-pound laser-guided bomb dropping from F/A-18 fighter jets,[331] Iranians were the first country to help the KRI.[332]

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[329] Falah Mustafa. Phone Interview with Author. April 21, 2020

[330] Denise Natali. "The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran". Syracuse University Press (November 11, 2005)

[331] CBS News. "U.S. bombs ISIS fighters in Iraq". *Aug 8, 2014. Link:* https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-airstrikes-will-make-sure-isis-cant-take-erbil-iraq-from-kurds/

[332] Mohammad Salih Mustafa. "Iran's Role in the Kurdistan Region." Aljazeera Center for Studies. 04/20/2016. Link: https://studies.aljazeera.net/sites/default/files/articles/reports/documents/111270e6cbb84b05950cdf51adbe74a9_100.pdf

Dabbagh recalls the dawn he was woken up in Tehran to participate in a meeting with Iranian officials.[333] One of the attendants of the meeting was Mohsen Rezaee, the secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council of the System. According to Dabbagh, the attendants of the meeting had different opinions about how to deal with the ISIS-KRI war. The opinion of the most influential individuals in the room was that Iran should rescue the KRI and fight ISIS within and outside of Erbil.[334] Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Javad Zarif, arrived in Erbil on August 26th to further discuss Iran's aid to the KRI with Kurdish officials. "The Islamic Republic of Iran not only gave them [the Kurds] guidance, but also organized and prepared their forces," Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazl told Iran's semi-official Mehr news agency.[335]

The KRI and the Iraqi forces defeated ISIS in Iraq by 2017 with the support of the international coalition. The absence of ISIS brough back the disputes between Erbil and Baghdad once again. The Kurdish leadership had to make a decisive decision and end those quarrels once and for all. However, unlike early 2000s when Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani were the two strongest men in Kurdistan, in 2017 few other leaders had emerged who had different views.

Masoud Barzani and his son Masrour thought that it was time to declare independence; Iraq was too weak to stop them, the KRI had already control over its entire claimed territories, and the KRI had gained extensive support from international community in the war against ISIS. Masrour Barzani had stayed in Washington DC during his studies of master's degree at the American University. He had established good connections with lobbyists and politicians in D.C. Hence the young Barzani was confident to gain some support from the US. The thyen-prime minister Nechirvan Barzani, however, did not agree with his uncle and cousin. Nechirvan Barzani preferred to keep the status quo and especially maintaining good relations with Ankara. Besides, he is known for abstaining from provoking violence and emphasizes on the importance of civil means and diplomacy.

On June 7th, 2017 Masoud Barzani met with Kurdish political parties to discuss his plans for independence. However, some political parties and individuals within the PUK refused Barzani's idea and through that the timing was bad. The fiercest local actor against Barzani's independence plan was the Young Generation Movement (Bizutnewey Naway Niwe) led by a young businessman called Shaswar Abdulwahid. The IGK then joined the Young Generation Movement and declared "No for Now" front arguing that they do not oppose independence, however, the timing for such endeavor was not right. The group also argued that Barzani's emphasis on independence was in essence to distract the public from the fact that his presential term had ended and was not legally extendable.

Talabani, at that time, was receiving treatment in Germany for a brain stoke that he had suffered from since 2012. His absence had divided the PUK into various fractions each

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[333] Nazim Dabbagh. Interview with Ziryan Haji. "Nazim Dabbagh: There is no force in the KRI without good relations with Haji Qasem.". Rudaw Media Network. January 15th, 2020. Link: https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/interview/15012020

[334] Nazim Dabbagh. Interview with Ziryan Haji. "Nazim Dabbagh: There is no force in the KRI…"

[335] Rebecca Collard. "The Enemy of My Enemy: Iran Arms Kurds in Fight Against ISIS." Time. AUGUST 27, 2014. Link: https://time.com/3196580/iran-kurds-isis-erbil-iraq/

competing over his succession. With Talabani being in coma, each fraction within the PUK had a different view towards Barzani's plan. Most of those who were originally from Barzani's controlled Erbil, such as Kosrat Rasul Ali, deputy of Talabani, Arsalan Bayiz the member of the PUK's political bureau were supporting Barzani. Najmaddin Karim, the PUK appointed governor of Kirkuk, also joined the pro-Barzani's PUK fraction. This group was opposed by the second strongest fraction within the PUK led by Talabani's wife, Hero. Talabani's family had a long enmity with the Barzani family and probably did not want a Kurdish state to be built by their historical rivals. The PUK had also historically been more pragmatic than Barzani, who is more nationalist, and advocated for cooperation with Baghdad. Barham Salih, who also led a smaller fraction within the PUK, was also hesitant but remained impartial. However, when Barzani fiercely pushed towards his plan, the rest of the PUK also unanimously backed the independence, fearing that not doing so will depict them as traitors among the Kurds. Hero and her wing though that Barzani's talk of independence was just a bluff and did not believe that he would actually go ahead with his daring plan anyways.[336]

Barzani established the 'Independent High Electoral and Referendum Commission' (IHERC) and set September 25th, 2017 as the day of independence referendum. This move was met by an international backlash. Even the US and Turkey, who had acted like the patron states of the KRI, harshly criticized such bold move.

One very crucial different between the KRI's patron states and the patron states of the other unrecognized states is that the KRI's patron states are against its independence. Turkey on one hand does not want to encourage its own Kurdish population to take the path the Iraqi Kurds have taken hence limits its support for the KRI within a unified Iraq. The US on the other hand, Jude writes, despite its crucial support for the KRI, has preserved its decades old policy in Iraq; supporting Iraq's unity as a federal democratic state.[337]

Turkey's first reaction to the KRI independence move was shutting down the air space over the KRI. Erdoğan also "warned that Turkey could block the KRG's oil exports. "We'll see who KRG will sell its oil to, Turkey is in control of the valve," he said, referring to the Kirkuk - Ceyhan oil pipeline that connects oil fields in northern Iraq to the oil terminal in the Mediterranean.[338] On October 4th, during an official visit to Tehran, Erdogan "stated during a joint press conference with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, "From this moment forward, more decisive steps will be taken."[339]

Iran also pressured the KRI leadership not to go ahead with the independence plan. Soleimani went to Erbil and met with Kosrat Rasul Ali, then the deputy secretary general of the PUK and the KRI vice president. Soleimani asked Ali to stop his support for Barzani

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[336] Abdulla Hawez. "For the first time: story of the fall of Kirkuk with all details." Draw Media. October 15th, 2019. Link: http://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=4466
[337] Jude. "Contesting borders?
[338] Daily Sabah. "Turkey could block KRG's oil exports in response to referendum, Erdoğan says". EP 25, 2017. Link:
https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2017/09/25/turkey-could-block-krgs-oil-exports-in-response-to-referendum-erdogan-says
[339] Financial Tribune. "Evaluating Economic Impact…"

and the referendum, in return Iran will appoint Ali to the head of the KRI[340]. When Ali refused, Soleimani told him: "next time I be here is to attend your funeral."[341]

Barzani refused all international offers, pressures and advices and insisted on going ahead with the referendum. He organized rallies throughout major cities of the KRI with tens of thousands attending and cheering for his speeches. Nechirvan Barzani, however, did not join the independence campaign fearing that he will anger his Turkish allies. Nevertheless, his press secretary refused the allegations that Nechirvan Barzani was against the referendum and claimed that the reason behind his absence in the campaigns was because "each actor had different roles and that he will also join the campaign in the coming days".[342] Nechirvan Barzani publicly joined the campaign a week for the referendum was held.

On the promised date, people, including in disputed areas, headed to the ballot boxes. Over 93% of the votes were in favor of independence. However, the Kurdish leadership claimed that they did not want to immediately declare independence and asked Haydar Al Abadi, the then-Prime Minister of Iraq, to begin peaceful negotiations over the procedures of the separation of Kurdistan. Abadi refused to negotiate with the Kurds and accumulated forces near the KRI borders. Baghdad also put partial embargo on the KRI and shut down KRI's two international airports in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah and cut the KRI's 17% federal budget completely. Kurds still refused to back down.

On October 13th Abadi gave the KRI forces 24 hours to withdraw from the disputed areas and nullify the referendum's outcome. The day after, Soleimani met with Talabani's wife, Hero Ibrahim Ahamd, and Aras Sheikh Jangi, Talabani's nephew and asked them to retreat and not to fight when the Iraqi army attacks Kirkuk.[343] According to some unofficial sources, Soleimani also met with the Talabani's oldest son, Pavel and Talabani's nephew Lahur Sheikh Jangi in Kirkuk's K1 airbase. Soleimani told the two cousins that if they back down and not fight, Soleimani will make them the leaders of the PUK. Otherwise, Soleimani showed them the palm of his hand, "the KRI would be destroyed and cleared like the palm of my hand." As for Barzani, Soleimani reassured the PUK leadership that Barzani will soon be removed from all titles and would not have a land to rule. According to Saadi Ahmad Pira, the spokesperson of the PUK, the head of Turkish intelligence MIT

[340] Nazim Dabbagh. Interview with Ziryan Haji. "Nazim Dabbagh: There is no force in the KRI…"

[341] Arif Qurbani. "Qsem Soleimani did not go to Kosrat's funeral". Rudaw Media Network. January 7th, 2020. Link: https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/07012020

[342] Kurdistan TV. "Nechirvan Barzani will support the independence referendum in the coming days." September 13, 2017. Link:
https://www.kurdistantv.net/ku/2017/09/13/kurdistan/%D9%86%DB%8E%DA%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%DA%A4%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%84%D9%87%E2%80%8C-%DA%95%DB%86%DA%98%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%E2%80%8C-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%DB%8C%E2%80%8C-%D9%87%D9%87%E2%80%8C%DA%B5%D9%85%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%AA%DB%8C%E2%80%8C-%D9%BE%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%87%E2%80%8C

[343] Hawez. "For the first time: story of…"

Hakan Fidan was also in the frontiers with the Iraqi and Iranian fighters against peshmarga.[344]

On October 15th Barzani met with the PUK leadership in Dokan, near Sulaymaniya. The two sides agreed to remain united and defend Kurdistan from any aggression from Baghdad. On early October 16th the Iraqi army, with the help of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launched the expected attack and marched towards Kirkuk. Kosrat Ali, led a unit of peshmarga and fought back. Ali fought fiercely against the Iraqi forces and was wounded. However, contrary to his threats, Soleimani arranged a private jet and sent Ali to Germany for treatment.[345]

The rest of the PUK forces, however, withdrew and did not fight. The commander of the KDP forces in Kirkuk, Kamal Karkuki, rushed to the PUK political bureau in Kirkuk and asked Wasta Rasool, the commander of the PUK forces about their reason behind their retreat.[346] Rasool responded: "we have an agreement with our friends in Baghdad, including Soleimani, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and even Americans. If we do not fight, they will peacefully control Kirkuk and submit the city to the PUK."[347] The Iraqi forces advanced towards the KDP strongholds in Erbil. The KDP retreated and withdrew to Pirde, near Erbil. After a fierce fight, the KDP stopped the Iraqi forces from advancing further.

The war lasted two days. The KRI lost over 51% of its territory, including oil rich Kirkuk and hence drying out the KRI's main oil revenue. The KRI's relations with Iran and Turkey completely deteriorated. On October 31st, 2017 Ankara stationed a unit of Iraqi army on Turkish soil near its border with the KRI.[348] The KRI was completely isolated from the outside world. Its allies such as the US and France stood idle and watched as Kurdish forces were being crushed. Nechirvan Barzani, then-the Prime Minister of the KRG, attempted to meet with Emmanuel Macron, the French president, and ask for help. However, the KRI's airports were shut down and hence Barzani was unable to get out of the landlocked region. His only chance was to go to Turkey and fly from Istanbul to Paris. But Turkey was no more the country that received him on the red carpet.

According to a source that preferred to remain anonymous, Nechirvan Barzani asked Salahaddin Bahaaddin, the Secretary General of the Islamic Union of Kurdistan (IUK), a Kurdish Muslim Brotherhood (MB) affiliated political party, to use his MB

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[344] Dana Omar. "The attitude of October 9th and 16th against Kurds persists". Roj News. October 16th, 2019. Link:
https://rojnews.news/%D8%AF%DB%86%D8%B3%DB%8C%DB%95/%D8%AF%DA%98%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D9%87%DB%95%DA%B5%D9%88%DB%8E%D8%B3%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D9%A9-%D9%88-%D9%A1%D9%A6%DB%8C-%D8%A6%DB%86%DA%A9%D8%AA%DB%86%D8%A8%DB%95%D8%B1-%D8%A8%DB%95%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%95%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%95-43128
[345] Hawez. "For the first time: story of…"
[346] Payamner. "New evidence on the October 16th betrayal exposed". May 5th, 2018. http://peyamner.net/archives/6797
[347] Payamner. "New evidence on the October 16th
[348] Financial Tribune. "Iraqi Forces Gain First Foothold at Kurdish Frontier With Turkey". October 31, 2017. Link:
https://financialtribune.com/articles/international/75329/iraqi-forces-gain-first-foothold-at-kurdish-frontier-with-turkey?utm_campaign=more-like-this

connections and convince Erdogan, who is also ideologically close to the Brotherhood, to let Barzani into Turkey. Bahaaddin then called Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of the MB affiliated Ennahdha Party in Tunisia. Ghanushi contacted Erdogan and convinced him to allow Barzani to travel to Paris through Turkey. Barzani then went to Paris and that was the first sign of normalizing relations of the KRI with the outside world.

The IUK then officially used its leverage and sent a delegation to Ankara to ease the tensions with Erbil. When the delegation returned, they told the press that the bilateral relations between the KRI and Turkey are improving and Erdogan will consider Nechirvan Barzani's request for a meeting.[349] However, Bahaaddin refuses that him or his political party have any relations with nation states, and instead, he sees the KRG's DFR as the only legitimate entity responsible for the KRI's foreign relations.[350]

2017-present: from IR back to RA

Under the unbearable pressure the KRI leadership nullified the independence referendum and started to normalize their relations with Baghdad and the neighboring countries. Although the KRI's relations with those actors have improved, it is never as good as before. The KRI does not have the strong cards to play with as it used to. Most importantly, Turkey and Iran do not trust the KRI leadership's promises, such as Talabani's promise to Turkey in 2009, that Kurds do not declare independence.

The KRI's diplomatic and trade relations with Turkey and Iran are back to normal. On 22 June 2019, now the President of the KRI Nechirvan Barzani, visited Istanbul and met with president Erdoğan. Other developments, "such as the Turkish officials' and businessmen's visits to the KRG and Nechirvan Barzani's meeting with President Erdoğan, show that both actors have been willing to normalize their relationship."[351]

Iran and the KRI also resumed their relations. On October 30th, 2017 Iran's Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Baqeri said that "Iran will reopen all its border crossings with Iraq's Kurdistan Region in the coming days, lifting restrictions imposed"[352]. In January 2018, a KRI delegation led by "Nechirvan Barzani met with Iranian Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani in Tehran, discussing bilateral relations between the Kurdistan Region and Iran."[353] In another meeting "between Barzani and Iran's President

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[349] Xozga Aziz. "What is the status of the IUK's attempts?" Xendan. January 8th, 2918. Link:
https://www.xendan.org/detailnews.aspx?jimare=40249&babet=1&relat=1024&__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=339
92351d7fa0480208dac755c473cf8b18c8a53-1589213985-0-
Ado5U4GA3QArzzuJogWYdm31xABZiYTUbk2CYMyIITXVlQji3sUCbjy6XvhLk2onkntJZBd7PN7K2tanekDSPe6
1GF7fPeUd9s5Q5I5_rQyWUyGqiGQBY0BjzJWtEAjzx6X4rA_p_UJQyTtX_coXhuYK5As5A8WAjBPreIdFBCUW
Cjk2ZvW-11txXiHurVtLIfFt6nZ5xLRwVXCTTTjFYdNAgUg0s9-Kl8zNwqyh4Tt-816207mEtMjWwvQjoRaHIX_-
LpUR0AXyAnkNA6hvw0K5GJjVYU98DW4ha1Vse9q80gJnip69LR1p4ESNdVxr0horqJAyqeACKRD65NtRJk4
[350] Salahaddin Bahaaddin. Phone interview with Author. April 4th, 2020
[351] Pusane. "Two years after the independence…"
[352] Financial Tribune. "Iran to Lift Border Curbs on KRG" October 30, 2017. Link:
https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-domestic-economy/75255/iran-to-lift-
border-curbs-on-krg?utm_campaign=more-like-this
[353] Baxtiyar Goran. "Iran maintains strategic relations with Kurdistan Region:
Parliamentary Speaker". Kurdistan 24 News. January 21-2018.
Link: https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/94108681-b8fd-4028-a7a4-09d990f11667

Hassan Rouhani on January 22, 2018 the latter called for closer economic cooperation between Tehran and KRG, saying that Tehran is keen to invest in development projects in Iraq's Kurdistan."[354] "In an effort to further enhance Iran-KRG trade, Tehran and Erbil have reportedly agreed to raise the number of border crossings between them to six from a current three."[355]

The KRI also "hosted an Iranian government trade delegation in Erbil during the fourth economic conference between the two parties on May 2-3 [2018] to discuss ways of expanding ties."[356] According to Aballah Akrayi, an official at KRG's DFR, relations between Tehran and Erbil have thawed noticeably since Nechirvan Barzani visited Tehran[357] in January 2018.

Although Soleimani was killed in the US airstrikes in early January 2020, the promises he made to the Kurdish leadership were kept by the Iranians. On October 29th, 2017 Masoud Barzani resigned as the president of the KRI. In February 2020 Lahor Talabani and Bafel Talabani "were elected co-leaders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) by the party's General Leadership Council".[358] Although Kosrat Ali survived his wounds, he is now marginalized and has limited power within the PUK.

In June 2019 Nechirvan Barzani became the president of the KRI, an office that had remained vacant for about two years. According to the Kurdish media, Turkey played a big role in appointing Nechirvan Barzani. Mostly because, as the Turkish minister of foreign affairs stated publicly, "Nechirvan Barzani was not with the independence referendum from the first place."[359]

The explicit demands of independence have practically died down among the Kurdish leadership. However, Massoud Barzani, whose title is now the president of the KDP, whenever given a chance to speak to the public defends his decision and promises the Kurds that independence will come on day. The rest of the Kurdish leadership act pragmatically and prefer rapprochement with Baghdad. Masrour Barzani, who is now the prime minister, has made tremendous compromises in his negotiations with Baghdad, during their negotiations to resolve the remaining issues. The new leadership of the PUK, however, go as far as demanding administrative and economic autonomy for their stronghold, Suleymaniyah province. Although they make these claims under the theme of "decentralization", the PUK sees these demands as an attempt to divide the KRI.

[354] Financial Tribune. "Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan Look to Bolster Trade". February 21, 2018. Link: https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/82326/iran-iraqi-kurdistan-look-to-bolster-trade?utm_campaign=more-like-this

[355] Financial Tribune. "Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan Look to…"

[356] Financial Tribune. "Iraqi Kurds Look to Open New Chapter with Iran". May 16, 2018. Link: https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-domestic-economy/86563/iraqi-kurds-look-to-open-new-chapter-with-iran?utm_campaign=more-like-this

[357] Financial Tribune. "Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan Look to…"

[358] Rudaw Media Network. "Bafel Talabani, Lahur Sheikh Jangi elected PUK co-leaders: party media". 18-02-2020. Link: https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/180220202

[359] Spee Media. "Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs: Nechirvan Barzani was not with referendum." 10/01/2018 Link: http://www.speemedia.com/dreja.aspx?=hewal&jmare=52689&Jor=1

Conclusion

Although Iraqi Kurds gained autonomy in 1991, they did not have a unified de facto state until after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. From then until now the KRI has pursued two policies: between 2003 and 2014 the KRI prioritized 'Regional Acceptance' (RA), while between 2014-17 it shifted to 'International Recognition' (IR). Peter Galbraith, a former United States diplomat, described the pre-2017 KRI writing: "The Kurdish region today functions as if it were an independent state. The Kurdistan Regional Government carries out virtually all government functions, and Baghdad law applies only to the extent the Kurdish Parliament chooses to apply it.[360] However, after the 2017 failed referendum, Dabbagh, the KRI representative to Iran, complains that now the KRI cannot even open a border gate with Iran without a signature from Baghdad. The IR policy between 2014-2017 stripped the KRI from most of the powers.

From 2017 to present the KRI changed its rhetoric back to RA. The KRI experience shows that when the de facto state pursed RA, it prospered and enjoyed regional tolerance. In contrast, when following IR, the KRI suffered from numerous tragedies and was almost annihilated. Therefore, since the modern experience shows that new-born states are almost impossible, RA appears to be the best alternative to IR for unrecognized states.

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[360] https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/01/opinion/as-iraqis-celebrate-the-kurds-hesitate.html

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Appendix 1: list of names and terms used among the Kurdish sectarian groups

Term	Meaning
Taghut	A leader who does not abide by Sharia law
Ahli bida'a	People of innovation. A term used by Salafists who practice rituals that are not of the origin of Islam and are innovated by religious individuals later.an
Bida'achi/Mubtadi'	Someone who follows innovation in religion
Dajjal	He is a person who is believed by the Muslims to appear before the doomsday to destroy religion and spread corrupt on earth.
Shakhas parast	Human worshiper. A term used by Salafists to describe Sufis who highly revere their sheikh.
Gor parast	Tomb worshipper. A term used by Salafists to describe Sufis who visit the tombs of their sheikhs and ask them to grand them their wishes.
Mal'uun	Cursed. A term used by all religious groups to describe their opponents
Munafiq	A hypocrite. Someone who superficially claims to be a Muslim but is actually a disbeliever.
Jasus	Spy. A term used by the opponents of Makhalis to describe who Salafists who support the rulers.
Arab	Since Salafism originates from the KSA, opponents of Kurdish Salafists call them Arab to illustrate that their beliefs are not compatible with the Kurdish areas.
Paswani taghut	The defenders of tyrants. Used by non-Madkhali Salafists (Jihadis and purists alike) to describe the Kurdish armed forces affiliated with the secular political parties, security and police.
Asha'ari	A term used by Salafist used to describe any Sunni who is not a Salafist
Madkhali	The last name of sheikh Rabii Hadee Al-Madkhali. Used by the opponents of Madkhali to limit their ideas of those Salafists only to those who follow sheikh Madkhali.
Salafi hizbi	Political salafist. Used by the opponents of Madkhali to describe the Salafists who support the KRI leadership
Tabdee	The act of excommunicating someone from Salafism

Appendix 2: TV stations of the religious groups in the KRI

TV name	Location	Affiliation
Zanayan	Erbil	UISK
Yekgirtu	Erbil	IUK
Judi	Erbil	IUK
U2	Erbil	IUK
Bizutnaway Islami	Erbil	IMK
Asman	Erbil	Sufi
Sirusht	Erbil	Sufi
Tasawuf	Erbil	Sufi
Komal	Garmyan	IGK
Komali Islami	Raniya	IGK
Bizutnaway Islami	Halabja	IMK
Sunnah	Suli	IGK
Yekgirtu	Suli	IUK
Yekgirtu	Raniya	IUK

Appendix 3. Radio stations of the religious groups in the KRI

Radio name	Location	Affiliation
Zanayan	Erbil	UISK
Bizutnaway Islami	Erbil	IMK
Yekgirtu-Erbil	Erbil	IUK
Yekgirtu-Koye	Koye	IUK
Qurani Piroz	Erbil	IGK
Chiray Runaki	Erbil	Salafi
Qurani Piroz	Suli	IGK
Yekgirtu-Garmiyan	Garmiyan	IUK
Sunnah	Suli	IGK
Yekgirtu-Halabja	Halabja	IUK
Dengi Komal-Kalar	Kalar	IGK
Dengi Islam-Kalar	Kalar	Salafi
Mihrab	Suli	Salafi
Payami Quran	Suli	Salafi
Yekgirtu-Chamchamal	Chamchamal	IUK
Dengi Komal-Raniya	Raniya	IGK
Dengi Komal-Slemani	Suli	IGK
Dengi Islam	Suli	Salafi
Dengi Yekgirtu	Suli	IUK
Payam	Akre	IGK
Bardarash	Bardarash	IUK