Religion among the Kurds: Between Naqshbandi Sufism and IS Salafism

Michiel Leezenberg

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In 2014, the Kurds once again came into the center of international attention; this time, however, it was not primarily their confrontation with existing states that captured the imagination, but rather their confrontation with a new, and radical, religious movement, the so-called Islamic State (IS), and in particular with its offensives against Sinjar in Northern Iraq and Kobanî on the Syrian-Turkish border. In the popular press, images of civilians of the Yezidi minority fleeing the near-genocidal IS onslaught onto Mount Sinjar acquired almost biblical qualities; likewise, reporting about Kobanî created a Manichaean opposition between 'modern' Kurdish guerrillas, many of them women, against 'medieval' IS fighters reported to treat captured women as slaves. Behind these reductionist and often overheated headlines, one may legitimately ask why the Kurds, the vast majority of whom are Sunni Muslims, could hardly be mobilized for the project of an Islamic State, and hardly rallied behind IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who had pronounced himself caliph in July 2014. Was it primarily religious, national, or other factors that make the Kurds less open to violent Salafi-Jihadi brands of Islam?
A different but related question is whether there are any varieties of Islam that may be considered specifically Kurdish – or are seen as such by Kurds themselves -, and whether one may as a result speak of a 'nationalization' of religion among the Kurds. I will address these questions by, first, discussing the state of the art of studies about religion among the Kurds; second, I trace the early modern rise of specifically Kurdish articulations of Sunni Islam; third, I discuss the confrontation of Kurdish religiosity with secular nationalism and Salafism in the twentieth century; fourth, I discuss the rise of politicized forms of religion among the Kurds, some of which might be qualified as

salafi-jihadi, in the 1980s. I will conclude with a few comments about the present predicament.

1. The study of religion among the Kurds: the state of the art

There is surprisingly little academic research on more orthodox formations of Sunni Islam among the Kurds. Until the present, research on religion in Kurdistan has displayed a clear bias towards religious minorities like Christians and Jews, and in particular to heterodox groups like the Yezidis and the Ahl-e Haqq. The former two attract attention because of their relevance for Semitic and Biblical studies, while the latter two have the appeal of the exotic, and of seeming to be specifically Kurdish religious formations. Thus, perhaps more studies have appeared on the Yezidis alone than of all other religious groups among the Kurds put together.[1]

It is not my intention to cast doubt on this research, much of which is quite valuable. Taken together, however, this bias has led to a systematic downplaying of more orthodox forms of (Sunni) Islam that play a role in the lives of the vast majority of Kurds.[2] A number of authors have studied the Sufi orders in the region, but generally with less attention to matters of doctrine, and more to Sufi shaykhs as leaders of (nationalist) organizations and rebellions.

The relative dearth of studies on more mainstream, and more orthodox, forms of Sunni Islamic religiosity among the Kurds may result from a tacit assumption – which one may call 'orientalist' if one likes – that orthodox varieties of (Sunni) Islam display relatively fewer local particularities, leave relatively less room for national identities and nationalist

[1] For a recent collection of papers on these various groups, including Christian ones, see Khanna Omarkhali (ed.) *Religious minorities in Kurdistan* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2014). On the Yezidis, see e.g. Nelida Fuccaro. *The other Kurds: Yezidis in colonial Iraq* (London 1999); Christine Allison, *The Yezidi oral tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan* (London 2001); Philip Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism: Its background, observances, and textual tradition* (Lewiston 1995); Birgül Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis* (London2010). On the Ahl-e Haqq, next to the classical studies by Minorsky, see e.g. Nuri Yasin al-Hirzani, *al-kake'iyye: Dirasa anthrubulujiyya li'l-haya al-'ijtima'iyya* (Erbil 2007). On the (Kurdish) Alevis, see e.g. the papers collected in Paul White & Joost Jongerden (eds.), *Turkey's Alevi enigma: A comprehensive overview* (Leiden: Brill 2003). On the Shabak , see Amal Vinogradov, 'Ethnicity, cultural discontinuity, and power brokers in Nortern Iraq: The case of the Shabak', *American Ethnologist* 1 (1974): 207-218; Michiel Leezenberg, 'Between Assimilation and Deportation: History of the Shabak and the Kakais in Northern Iraq', in B. Kellner-Heinkele & K. Kehl-Bodrogi (eds.) *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill 1997).

[2] For a notable exception, see e.g. Martin van Bruinessen & Joyce Blau (eds.) 'Islam des Kurdes'. *Les annales de l'autre Islam*, no. 5 (1998). Paris: INALCO. See also the papers collected in Van Bruinessen's *Mullas, Sufis, and heretics: The role of religion in Kurdish society* (Istanbul: ISIS Press 2000).

agendas, and are shaped by Arab culture and Arabic-language learning rather than by local customs and vernacular traditions. This assumption, however, is misguided: on closer inspection, it appears that specifically Kurdish forms of Sunni Islamic religiosity *did* emerge in early modern times. Below, I will therefore focus on articulations and rearticulations of more orthodox forms of Sunni Islamic religiosity in the early modern and modern periods, at the expense of religious minorities like those mentioned above. This is not to say, of course, that the complex interactions of evolving religious minority traditions with the development of a secular Kurdish national identity (and of new forms of politicized fundamentalist Islam) is not worth studying, or is any less important.[3] Lack of space is the only justification I can give for this omission.

2. Islam among the Kurds: a short historical sketch

It has long been known that Kurds generally belong to the Shafi'ite madhhab, as opposed to their generally Hanafi Turkish and Arab neighbours; more specifically, they also have a significant attachment to Naqshbandism. Below, I will briefly sketch how this identification came about. The creation of a pre- or proto-nationalist Kurdish Islamic tradition appears to have occurred primarily among the smaller rural medreses of Northern Kurdistan, which were less susceptible to the influence of the Ottoman authorities and of the state-backed ulema (and to the apparent encouragement of the use of Turkish next to Arabic) than the mosques and medreses in the bigger cities of the region. The 17th-century Ottoman travel writer Evliya Çelebi noted that the Kurds were famous for their religious learning in Arabic and Persian; but starting in the late 17th century, a number of introductory textbooks came to be written in the Kurmanji, the Northern Kurdish dialect. These textbooks subsequently became part of the *rêz*, or medrese curriculum, all over Northern Kurdistan. The most famous of these textbook authors is, of course, Ehmedê Khanî; he not only composed the mathnawî poem *Mem û Zîn*, which appears to have been widely read in medrese circles, but also wrote several short Kurdish-language works of religious learning, like the *Nûbihara piçûkan*, a small rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary, and the *Eqîdeya Emanê*, a short profession of the

[3] Thus, I will also avoid discussion of how, especially in more secular nationalist circles, the Yezidi faith has come to be construed as a branch or offshoot of Zoroastrianism, and, as such, the Kurds' original, pre-Islamic religion.

Sunni Islamic faith according to the Shafi'ite rite. Next to these rhymed works, which also included an older *Mawlud* or biography of the prophet by Mollah Bateyî (d. 1491), in the eighteenth century, also a number of prose works for use in local medreses were written, like Elî Teremaxî's *Tesrîf*, on the morphology of Arabic, Persian, and Kurdish; and Mullah Yûnus Khalqatînî's *Terkîb û Zurûf*, a commentary of sorts on Abd al-Qâhir al-Jurjânî's famous short textbook on *nahw* or 'syntax', the *Miyyat al-amil*. Soon, all these works would become staple items of the medrese curriculum of the rural medreses in Northern Kurdistan; jointly, they embody what one may call the *vernacularization* of Kurdish medrese learning, i.e., the rise of the Northern dialect of Kurdish as a language of written literature and religious learning.[4]

Another specifically Kurdish development in early modern Islamic learning is the emergence of the Khalidiyya branch of the Naqshbandi order in the 19th century. Its founder, Mewlana Khalid Naqshbandi (1776-1827) has attracted rather less scholarly attention than such early modern reformers as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Shah Waliullah, but authors like Albert Hourani and Butrus Abu-Manneh have emphasized his tremendous his importance; the latter, some authors have argued, has been crucial in identifying 'Sufism in general, and the Khalidi branch of the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya brotherhood in particular, as the leading element of Islamic revivalism in the Ottoman polity of the time'.[5] He was born in Qaradagh in the Shahrizur district, into a family belonging to the Jaf tribe. During a pilgrimage to Mecca, he was intrigued by an Indian saint sitting with his back towards the Kaaba, and moved to turn to India. In Delhi, he was initiated into the Mujaddidi branch of the Naqshbandi order, which had originally been founded by Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624); in agreement with this tradition, he enjoined his followers to abide by the shari'a, to follow the sunna, and to avoid *bid'a* or heretic innovation. In 1812 [?], he returned to Kurdistan, until his increasing rivalry with local Qadiri shaykh Ma'ruf Nodê forced him to flee the city. In 1821 [?], he left for

[4] I have described his process of vernacularization in more detail in 'Elî Teremaxî and the vernacularization of medrese learning in Kurdistan', *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 5: 713-733. See also Zeynelabidin Zinar, *Xwendina medresê* (Stockholm 1993).

[5] I. Weismann & F. Zachs (eds.), 'Foreword', *Ottoman reform and Muslim regeneration: Studies in honor of Butrus Abu-Manneh* (London: I.B. Tauris 2005), p. 10. Cf. e.g. Albert Hourani, 'Sufism and Modern Islam: Mawlana Khalid and the Naqshbandi order,' in *The emergence of the modern Middle East* (London 1981), pp. 75-89; Butrus Abu-Manneh, *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman empire in the 19th century (1826-1876)* (Istanbul: Isis Press 2001).

Baghdad, and eventually settled in Damascus, from where his deputies spread to various parts of the empire, in particular to its non-Arab parts.

Martin van Bruinessen (1992: 228) has explained the rapid rise of the Khalidî Naqshbandî tarîqa among the Kurds in the nineteenth century, in part at the expense of the rivaling Qadiri order, as resulting from the Ottoman abolition of the Kurdish local hereditary kingdoms or emirates as part of their centralizing Tanzimat reforms;[6] but this rise began well before the onset of the Tanzimat in 1839, and appears to be part of a wider early modern religious dynamic. The most important factor in this dynamic was undoubtedly the late eighteenth-century emergence of the Wahhabî movement in the Arabian peninsula. In 1801, warriors of this movement attacked the Shi'ite shrine cities in Southern Iraq, besieging Najaf and sacking Karbala; in 1806, they even captured Mecca. These rapid conquests not only dealt a serious blow to the political prestige and religious legitimacy of the Ottoman authorities; they also provoked the local Shi'ite clergy, who felt increasingly unprotected without the support of loyal local tribes, to initiate a campaign of converting the population of Southern Iraq to Shi'ism.[7] Butrus Abu-Manneh has argued that there are good reasons to believe that the Khalidiyya Naqshbandi reform movement, too, was at least in part a reaction against the Wahhabî onslaught: although there are no explicit statements on shaykh Khalid's reaction to the Wahhabi conquest, his immediate departure for Delhi – where he went on to study with Shah Waliullah's followers, may indicate a negative attitude to the Wahhabiyya.[8] Already in the 1820s, some of shaykh Khalid's deputies had settled in Istanbul; after his death, the order quickly became more dependent on Ottoman patronage and financial support. Although sultan Mahmud II initially tried to curb the order's expansion, a number of shaykh Khalid's followers quickly gained positions of influence in the capital, especially in the wake of the demise of the Bektashi order associated with the Janissaries and of the Greek revolt.[9]

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[6] Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The social and political structures of Kurdistan* (London 1992), esp. pp. 224-234. In fairness, it should be noted that Van Brunessen also mentions the Khalidiyya Naqshbandi's distinct and decentralized organizational structure as a prime cause of their rapid expansion

[7] Yitzak Nakash, *The Shi'ites of Iraq* (Princeton NJ 1994), esp. pp. 25-48).

[8] Butrus Abu-Manneh, 'The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya in the Ottoman lands in the early 19th century'. *Die Welt des Islams* XXII (1982): 1-36.

[9] Abu-Manneh (1982: 34-35).

In short, the rapid rise of the Khalidiyya Naqshbandis among the Kurds is due not only to the local effects of the Tanzimat reforms, as Van Bruinessen argues, but appears to be part of a broader pattern of Islamic renewal across the Ottoman empire. Thus, in Iraq, Naqshbandis vied with Wahhabis and Shi'ites for the favors, or souls, of population. If this hypothesis is correct, it goes some way in explaining the Khalidiyya's pronouncedly anti-Shi'ite and – as we will see – increasingly polemical anti-Wahhabi or anti-Salafi character.

Mawlana Khalid was not only a religious reformer or innovator, but also – alongside and possibly in competition with his great Qadiri rival, shaykh Ma'ruf Nodê – a pioneer of the written use of the Sulaimaniya dialect of Kurdish. In the early 19th century, when the Hawrami dialect was still the major medium of literary expression encouraged by the Baban court in Sulaimaniya, both Node and Khalid started writing works in the vernacular of the local population. Shaykh Ma'ruf compiled a short rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary comparable to Khanî's *Nûbihar*, the *Ehmedî*, and shaykh Khalid wrote a profession of faith, the *Eqîdetname*, in a very simple prose.[10] They thus gave an important impetus to the vernacularization of the Sulaimaniya dialect, which ultimately came to be known as Sorani, and which started around a century after that of the Kurmanji dialect in Northern Kurdistan.[11]

In short, from the late seventeenth century onward, specifically Kurdish forms of religious learning arose, at first in the Northern parts of Kurdistan, but from around 1800 on also further South, in the area centered around Sulaimaniya. Athough these were not themselves nationalist, they contributed to laying the foundations for a modern Kurdish national identity.

3. The twentieth century: Kurdish Islam confronting secular nationalism

In the later 19th and early 20th centuries, this reformist religion increasingly coalesced, or collided, with newly emerging forms of secular nationalism. Thus, in the wake of the

[10] The *Ehmedî* has been reprinted regularly, and is still available in most bookstores in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan. The text of the *Eqîdetname*, based on a 1877 manuscript, was published by Muhammad Mala Karim in 1981 as *Aqîday kurdiy Mawlânâ Khâlidî Naqshbandi* (*Govârî korî zanyârî 'îrâq-dastay kurde* 8: 199-222); this edition was reprinted in Kemal Re'ûf Muhammad, *Eqîdey 'îmân – 'eqîdey kurdî* (Arbil 2004).

[11] Cf. my 'Between local rivalries and transnational networks: Mawlana Khalid as a linguistic pioneer', paper presented at the international conference on Mawlânâ Khalid Naqshbandi, Sulaimaniya, 2009.

1878 Russo-Ottoman war, the Naqshbandis quickly adopted the novel patriotic, or nationalist, vocabulary of 'love for the fatherland' (*hubb-ı vatan*) and defence of the nation.[12] It has also been observed that the Kurdish shaykhs, because they could mediate in the now-increasing tribal conflicts, 'became the obvious focal points for nationalist sentiment' (Van Bruinessen 1992: 234); thus, a number of revolts that have been interpreted as nationalist or as 'proto-nationalist' have been led by, in particular, Naqshbandi shaykhs. This is not to say, of course, that the Naqshbandis are the sole or even necessarily the most important Sufi order involved in the Kurdish national movement. Especially the Qadiri order, which was characterized by more ecstatic dhikr rituals and by more hereditary forms of leadership than the Naqshbandis, played a major role in a number of 19th- and 20th-century revolts in the Kurdish provinces, and more generally in the development of a Kurdish national movement, yielding nationalist leaders like, most famously, shaykh Mahmoud Barzinji; likewise, both the Talabani and the Barzani families have Qadiri backgrounds.[13]

Another doctrinal, or ideological, development of late 19th-century Khalidi Nashbandi Islam is its increasingly pronounced anti-Salafi character. In later publications, Salafis like, most famously, Rashid Rida, are generally called *lâ-madhhabiyya* or 'no-madhhab'. One of the central dogmas of the Naqshbandi conception of faith or imân is respect for the madhhabs; this article of faith pits the Naqshbandis directly against the Wahhabîs, who – nominally at least – brandish the adherence to a particular madhhab as a form of *taqlîd* or slavish imitation, or, worse, idol worship (*shirk*). In practice, of course, Wahhabis abided by the Hanbali rite; but the ideology of rejecting the legitimacy of madhhabs has proved a powerful and enduring aspect of Wahhabi, and more generally Salafi, reformulations of the Islamic faith. Most famously, a late 19th-century pamphlet appeared in Ottoman Naqshbandi circles, alleging that Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab had been visited by a British spy, who taught him to drink whisky and conspired with him to destroy true Islam. Versions of this tale circulate in Naqshbandi circles in the form

[12] Serif Mardin, 'The Nakshibendi order of Turkey', in M. Marty & S. Appleby (eds.) *Fundamentalisms and the State* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1993), p. 205; quoted in Yavuz (2003: 138, 298n).
[13] On the Qadiris in Kurdistan, see especially Martin van Bruinessen, 'The Qadiriyya and the lineages of Qadiri shaykhs in Kurdistan', *Journal of Sufi Studies* 1 (1999): 131-149; cf. Van Bruinessen (1992: ch. 4, esp. pp. 216-240).

of oral traditions or printed pamphlets, even as far afield as Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.[14]

In the early 20th century, the Naqshbandis in formerly Ottoman lands suffered a number of major setbacks, though not a *coup de grâce*, in their confrontation both with secular nationalism and state-backed Salafism. First, in 1925 the Wahhabi warriors of the Bani Sa'ud conquered Mecca and Medina, and ousted the Naqshbandis, for whom these cities had been major centers for transnational organization and mobilization. Second, a series of legal measures taken by the –staunchly secular and militantly nationalist – Kemalist rulers of the new Republic of Turkey seriously weakened Naqshbandism. First, they ordered all Sufi lodges to be closed; second, they ordered the closing down of all medreses; third, they banned the use of Kurdish both in public and in private. Thus, the establishment of the republic of Turkey dealt a major blow both to Kurdish vernacular learning and to the Naqshbandi networks that gave Kurdish society greater coherence.[15] In the longer run, however, these measures led to the adaptation of the Naqshbandi order to the new circumstances, and to its transformation from a collective tariqa-based form of religiosity to a more individualized, depoliticized, and print-based faith, which successfully adapted to the demands and constraints imposed by the secular-nationalist Turkish state, and of a more urbanized and increasingly literate society (cf. Yavuz 2003: ch. 7). The most famous example of such adaptation is undoubtedly the career of Said Nursi (1876-1960), author of the massive, and widely read, *Risale-i nur*, and famous as the inspirator of the so-called Nurcu movement. It is less well known that in his early years, Nursi had been an ardent Kurdish patriot, who, moreover, saw no contradiction between his Islamic reform agenda and his Kurdish national solidarity.[16] Thus, in his *Divan-ı harbi örfi*, written in 1909, Nursi praises the 'patriotic zeal' with which his friend Khalil Khayali of Mutki has 'created the basis of our language', through his work on Kurdish orthography, grammar, and syntax; stating that 'language is the key to the future

[14] In contemporary Turkey, a recent version of this story is available in several different languages, in English as *Confessions of a British Spy* (Hakikat kitabevi, n.d.); available at http://www.hakikatkitabevi.net/book.php?bookCode=018 (accessed February 7, 2015).
[15] Clandestinely, however, Kurdish-language medrese education continued for decades, even if on a much smaller scale; cf. Leezenberg (2014).
[16] Rohat Alakom, 'Said Nursi entre l'identité kurde et l'identité musulmane'. *Les annales de l'autre Islam,* no. 5 (1998): 317-331.

of peoples', he concludes with an appeal to the 'Kurdish lions' to wake up from their 'five hundred-year slumber'.[17]

Nursi expressed his admiration for such heroes of vernacular Kurdish learning as Melayê Jezîrî, Ehmedê Khanî, and Mewlana Khalid, and was actively involved in efforts to open Kurdish-language schools in the Ottoman empire's eastern province, and even a 'university of the East', to be built in Van. These efforts were inspired not only by the belief that instruction in one's native tongue was basic to national awakening, but also by a view/project of the shafi'ite madhhab of Sunni Islam of as a Kurdish national religion. In the newly formed republic of Turkey, Nursi's political projects came to an abrupt halt. After the suppression of the shaykh Said revolt in 1925 and his being sent into inner exile in Isparta province, Nursi carefully abstained from any statement that could be construed as political activism, whether of an Islamic religious or a Kurdish nationalist character.

Thus, Naqshbandism, and more specifically its Khalidiyya branch, underwent a major transformation. In republican Turkey, although virtually invisible, it ultimately came to provide what Yavuz has called the 'matrix' out of which the major Islamist personalities and movements in twentieth-century Turkey emerged:[18] Naqshbandi discourse, institutions, practices, and networks, he argues, decisively shaped the outlook of Islamists like Said Nursi, Fethullah Gülen, Necmettin Erbakan, Turgut Özal, and Recep Tayyıp Erdogan, even if some of these may hardly, and others no at all, be described as 'Sufis' in anything like the conventional sense of the word. Thus, already before the kemalist ban on Sufi orders, Nursi had dismissed the tariqas as backward.

Further, Naqshbandi .. Kurdish consciousness, although they were generally not exclusively, unambiguously, or even explicitly, Kurdish. As one Kurdish scholar, himself of Naqshbandi sympathies, recently argued, Kurdistan is actually a 'Naqshbandistan'.[19] While such sweeping claims are undoubtedly an overstatement, they point to an enduring

[17] Said Nursi, *Divan-ı harbi örfî* (Istanbul: Tenvir Nesriyat 1992), p. 59-61, quoted in Alakom 1998: 321-323. Alakom also notes how in later editions of Nursi's work, the references to Kurdistan, Kurds, Kurdish identity., etc., and Kurdish national awakening have tacitly been changed to more neutral terms like 'Eastern Anatolia' and 'citizens', or even omitted altogether.

[18] See Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford University Press 2003), in particular ch. 6.

[19] Abdurrahim Alkis, speaking at the Nûbihar symposium 'Ziman û dîn û nasname', Diyarbakır, September 2013.

role of Naqshbandi sympathies and conceptions, even if, as noted above, as an organizational framework or institution, the Naqshbandi tariqa is no longer a major force in Kurdish society, whether in Turkey or elsewhere.

Syria and Iraq, the new Arab states with substantial Kurdish minorities, were rather more tolerant of organized forms of religion than Turkish republic; although the different branches of the Baath party that came to power in both countries in 1963 considered themselves secular and socialist, neither of them outlawed the Sufi orders. Rather, it was their Arab nationalist agenda that increasingly clashed with Kurdish aspirations. In Baathist Iraq, Sunni Arabs were a minority, and the Muslim Brothers were far weaker than in Egypt or Syria; religion may have played a role in organization or mobilization; but it was hardly turned into an ideological expression of the confrontation between the Kurdish insurgence and the regime, which were generally articulated in secular nationalist rather than in religious or sectarian terms. In Syria, Asad's Baathist regime leaned heavily on Alawites of rural backgrounds, and consequently marginalized the Sunni Arab population in cities like Aleppo, Homs and Hama; in these cities, opposition to the regime was increasingly articulated in Salafist terms, and expressed through groups like, most importantly, the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence, the regime integrated significant numbers of Kurds of a Naqshbandi background, who were opposed against salafism, into the national religious leadership. Most famous among these Kurdish-background ulama were Ahmad Kaftaro, who was Syria's grand mufti until his death in 2004, and the reformist cleric Sa'id Ramadan al-Bûtî, who according to local observers appeared on television almost as often as the president, until his assassination in the Iman mosque in Damascus in March 2013. Kaftaro hailed from a traditional Kurdish family from Hayy al-Akrad in the Salihiyye quarter of Northern Damascus; al-Butî, by contrast, stemmed form a Kurdish family that had fled the establishment of a new Turkish republic, which was as oppressive of organized religion as it was of Kurdish identity. Both clerics openly declared their loyalty to the Baathist Syrian state, and publicly condemned the violence committed by Islamist activists. Thus, Kaftaro was quite outspoken in his condemnation of the actions of the Muslim Brothers, like the 1979 massacre of army cadets in Aleppo and the 1982 revolt in Hama; al-Bûtî also condemned the increasingly sectarian Islamist revolt against Bashar al-Assad's regime that had started in 2011. Both also hailed from

Naqshbandi circles and in part reproduced the by then traditional anti-salafist discourse; thus, al-Butî published a refutation of Salafism under the typically Naqshbandi title *al-lâmadhabiyya* ('The no-madhhab').[20]

In the present-day Turkish setting, the contrast between Naqshbandi-inspired and Salafi varieties of Islam overlaps with the national, or nationalist, distinction between Turks and Arabs, and ends to reinforce the negative stereotypes a good many ethnic Turks – and Kurds – have about Arabs. Thus, among Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, Naqshbandi ideas and attitudes live on, albeit in rather different institutional settings and developing along rather different lines. Clearly, the modern nation state decisively shapes the development of both organized and individualized religion.

4. The 1980s and beyond: the rise and decline of Kurdish salafi-jihadism

It was only in the 1980s that Salafist ideas, and Salafi-inspired forms of politicized Islam, gained more currency among the Kurds; but even now, they remained marginal. The origins of this development, which, once again, displays significant differences between Turkey and Iraq, not to mention Syria and Iran, are still only partially understood. Generally, however, it seems to have been encouraged by the example of the Islamic revolution in Iran and its promise of a more revolutionary, progressive form of Islam; by the jihad in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, led by Sunni insurgents and supported by networks of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i Islami and the Jamiat Ulama-e Islam in Pakistan; and by the Sunni revolt against the Assad regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One cannot assume as a matter of course, however, the salafi-jihadi character or connections of these new forms of Kurdish religio-political activism.

[20] On Kaftaro, see Annabelle Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Assad* (Freiburg: Arnold-Bergsträsser-Institut 1998); Leif Stenberg, Préserver le charisme. Les consequences de la mort d'Ahmad Kaftaro sur la mosquée-complexe Abu al-Nur.' *Maghreb-Machrek* (2009). On al-Butî, see Andreas Christmann, 'Islamic scholar and religious leader: A portrait of Shaykh Muhammad Sa'îd Ramadân al-Bûtî', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 9 (1998): 149-169; the appendix to this article reproduces a debate between al-Buti and a young salafist from *al-lâmadhhabiyya*. See also al-Butî's own memoirs of his father, *Hadha wâlidi* (Damascus 1995; Turkish translation *Babam Molla Ramazan al-Bûtî* (Istanbul n.d. [2007])).

About the extent and nature of the links to the wider salafi-jihadi movement that had emerged during the 1980s, not much is known at present.[21]

Kurdish activism in Turkey developed in a distinct way, shaped primarily, it seems, by the national arena of that time. Many if nt most of these were peaceful: from the early 1990s onward, a number of Kurdish nationalist organization of Naqshbandi, and more specifically Nurcu, background had emerged, most importantly Nûbihar publishing house, which over the years published not only a magazine, but also an impressive list of Kurdish-language books, among which Kurdish translations of Said Nursi's works loom large.

The most significant, and most violent, form of politicized Islam to emerge the Southeast of Turkey from the late 1970s on was the development of the so-called Kurdish Hizbullah. It originated in circles around a number of Islamist bookstores, especially in Batman province and divided into different factions; in the course of the 1980s, the one headed by Hüseyin Velioglu (1952-2000) emerged as the strongest among these. Although its name suggests otherwise, this group had no links with the (Shi'ite and Iran-backed) Hizbullah in Lebanon; rather, Velioglu and his fellow activists studied the writings on revolutionary Islam by lay authors like Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shari'ati, and had been inspired by the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion, and the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in Egypt, which had culminated in the 1982 Hama uprising.

Dorronsoro (2004) criticizes earlier analyses of KH, for taking for granted the existence of links between KH and the Muslim Brothers or international Salafism; such links, he argues, should be demonstrated rather than assumed. There is no evidence, either, that Velioglu's radicalization was linked in any way to clandestine medrese circles, or to Naqshbandi networks. Instead, his radicalization appears to have occurred while he was a student of political science in Ankara in the later 1970s, around the same time as the future PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan. This may be no accident: in the Turkey of the late 1970s, it was the secular environment of the universities, and student radicalism, rather

[21] On the Afghan jihad and its links to the al-Azhar network, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Jamaat-i Islami, see Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989); on the salafi-jihadi 'movement' (which never was a unified or centrally led organization anyway), see in particular Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: Expansion et déclin de l'islamisme* (Paris: Gallimard 2000).

than any organized – let alone politicized – form of religion, that shaped different forms of militancy. This is not to say that political activism during this period during this period was entirely secular: in different settings, the opposition between Right and Left overlapped with, or was construed as overlapping with, the distinction between Muslims and atheists, or between Sunnis and Alevis. The vocabulary in which such conflicts and oppositions were articulated, however, generally came from secular Marxist and nationalist doctrines, rather than from (politicized) Islam.

It was not until the early 1990s that KH gained broader attention – indeed notoriety: in 1991, it started a campaign of assassinations of PKK activists and journalists of the pro-Kurdish newspaper *Özgür Gündem*. Pro-PKK sources dismissed the organization, which they disparagingly called *Hizb-i Kontra*, as merely a death squad set up by Turkish intelligence; but this seems to be an oversimplification.[22] By the late 1990s, Kurdish Hizbullah had largely ceased its activities, due in part to several waves or arrests of its members; in 2000, its leader Velioglu was shot in an Istanbul police raid. After 2004, however, it reappeared in a wholly different guise: in the new political landscape created by AKP and by the then-ongoing rapprochement with the EU, and later by what AKP called the 'Kurdish opening', which created unprecedented, if still precarious, opportunities for Kurdish self-expression. From 2008 on, KH activists published a weekly, *Dogru Haber*.

In this new atmosphere in which, obviously, public Islam, too, was given much more room than under earlier Kemalist rule, KH re-emerged, but this time operating through civil society organizations rather than resorting to violent action. KH-affiliated activists started convening mass public gatherings, like celebrations to mark the prophet's birthday, but also protest demonstrations, like one against the Danish cartoons in 2006/7///8, which reportedly drew around half a million people, or against the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in January 2015, in which some 100,000 people participated. Despite such public displays of strength, it is unclear exactly what the

[22] There is no full-fledged academic study of the backgrounds and activities of the Kurdish Hizbullah yet, only a number of journalistic sources; but see Gilles Dorronsoro, *La nébuleuse Hizbullah* (Istanbul 2004). On KH's re-emergence in the early twenty-first century, see Mustafa Gürbüz, 'Revitalization of Kurdish Islamic Sphere and Revival of Hizbullah in Turkey'. in F. Bilgin & A. Sarıhan (eds.) Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question (London: Lexington Books 2013), pp. 167-178.

electoral strength of this movement is: in late 2012, a political party, Hüda-Par, was formed, but at the time of writing, this had not yet been put to the test in elections. 2014 saw a serious rise in intra-Kurdish tensions in Turkey. Although not themselves engaging in acts of violence, Hüda-Par supporters openly sympathized with the 'Islamic State' (IS)., whose fighters were at he time besieging the Kurdish-held town of Kobanî. In October, in the wake of the Kobanî crisis, serious clashes erupted between PKK and Hüda-Par sympathizers; or rather, attacks by PKK sympathizers on Hüda-Par offices, which left dead at least 35 Kurds, the majority of them Islamists. In particular the town of Cizre witnessed an ongoing cycle of violence, which left several activists dead.[23] In short/Thus. Although openly expressing sympathy for Salafi-Jihadi groups, and possibly also maintaining contacts of some sort, Kurdish Islamists in Turkey generally appear to have followed their own trajectory.

The links of the activist Islamist groups that emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1980s and 1990s with salafist-jihadist networks are far clearer. During the 1990s, the most important of these was the Islamic Movement Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK), led by Mollah Othman Abdulaziz. Reportedly, Mollah Othman had joined the Muslim Brotherhood during his studies at al-Azhar university in Cairo; he also had contacts with the Jamaat-i Islami in pakistan and with the Afghan Mujahedin, in particular Burhaneddin Rabbani. One IMIK spokesman claimed that, although Mullah Othman had developed his own teaching, he was close in outlook to other salafi-jihadi groups.[24]

After Mullah Othman's death in 1999, IMIK split into a number of different factions. The most famous – or notorious of the new leaders was undoubtedly Mullah Krekar (pseudonym of Najmaddin Faraj), who had connections to Abdallah Azzam's Maktab al-khidamat in Peshawar, and reportedly also Usama bin Laden. In 2001, he formed a new group, Jund al-Islam, which subsequently merged with other jihadist groups into Ansar al-Islam. The latter was engaged in a number of violent clashes with PUK force. In the wake of the September 11 assaults in the U.S., the PUK succeeded in convincing that Ansar formed the missing link between Saddam Husayn and Usama bin Laden; as a

[23] 'How Cizre became a combat zone?', *al-Monitor*, January 15, 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/01/turkey-syria-kurds-kobane-cizre.html# (accessed February 7. 2015).
[24] Interview, London, June 2000. On IMIK, see my 'Political Islam among the Kurds', in F. Abdul-Jabar & H. Dawod (eds.) *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics* (London: Saqi Books, pp. 203-227), esp. pp. 216-223.

result, Ansar, which had its bulwark in the Iran-Iraq frontier area near Halabja, was crushed with the aid of American air power in the spring of 2003. In September 2002, Krekar, who had refugee status in Norway, had already been arrested while in transit at Amsterdam airport; narrowly avoiding extradition to the U.S., he returned to Norway, where he was eventually tried, and imprisoned for several years, on charges of having uttered death threats against local Norwegian politicians and secular Kurdish activists.[25] In the longer run, however, it was Ali Bapir rather than Krekar who played a lasting – if relatively minor – role in Kurdish politics. A native of Ranya, where he continued to have a large constituency, Bapir founded Komala after breaking away from IMIK. As part of the operations against Ansar Islam, Bapir was arrested by American forces in 2003 and imprisoned, but released in 2005; in prison, according to his own account, he succeeded in converting a number of Baathist inmates.[26] Since then, Komala has been involved in electoral politics rather than armed action, on occasion forming a list combination with parties like Yekgirtuy Islami and Hama Haji Mahmoud's Socialist Party. As of early 2015, Komala has 6 seats in the regional parliament.

5. Some theoretical conclusions

In the twenty-first century, the Qadiri and Naqshbandi orders may not as such mobilize large parts of the population any longer; but Naqshbandi-inspired discourse, attitudes, practices, and organizational forms continue to shape Islamic, and Islamist, sensibilities among Turks, Kurds, and others. As such, they pose an interesting challenge to a number currently influential accounts of Muslim fundamentalism. For example, the French scholar Olivier Roy has famously argued that political Islam, as the revolutionary project of creating an Islamic state, had failed already by the early 1990s; what he calls 'neofundamentalism', however, or the drive to islamicize society, was as strong as ever. In particular out of this failure, Islamist movements (whether in the Islamic Republic of Iran or in post-Mubarak Egypt) have entered into a stage of 'post-Islamism', in which (not necessarily liberal-secularist) Islamist activists recognize that there is a distinct

[25] In 200, Krekar's memoirs appeared in Norwegian as *Med egne ord* (Oslo: Aschehoug).
[26] Interviews with Ali Bapir, May 2009, May 2011. For Komala's perspective on the 1980s 'Islamic revolt' in Iraqi Kurdistan, see e.g. Sherîf Werzêr & Muhammad Zerzî (eds.), *Jewleyek le qewlayî khâkî nîshtîmanda* (Sulaimaniya 2009).

sphere or space of politics that is not, and should not, be driven by religious considerations. In later work, Roy has argued that in the early twenty-first century, a new, globalized Islam has emerged that is deterritorialized, deculturalized, and depoliticized: from a territorially limited political struggle for the control of an existing state it has turned into a worldwide and never-ending struggle between good and evil; on this analysis, al-Qaida is only the most extreme and most visible embodiment of this globalized Islam.[27] Roy further argues that 21st-century Salafism is the ideal candidate for such a globalized form of Islam: in its puritan rejection of local customs and traditions as forms of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) or idol worship (*shirk*), it develops a deculturalized form of religion, purged of all culturally specific references, which is particularly attractive for converts in other societies.

Roy's theses, important and thought-provoking as they are, encounter a number of major difficulties when confronted with contemporary articulations of Islam among the Kurds. To begin with, they ignore the distinctly Naqshbandi character of Turkish and Kurdish islamisms: organizations like the Nurcus and the Gülen movement arguably have a Naqshbandi genealogy, and, in some cases, an explicitly anti-Salafi outlook. Further, Roy's neat analytical distinction between political Islam and neofundamentalism as targeting, respectively, the state and society downplays or overlooks the enormous differences in state-society relations, even between neighbouring countries like Turkey and Iraq (both of which, it should be recalled, belonged to the same Ottoman policy barely a century ago). The distinct trajectories of Islam and Islamism in these respective countries, moreover, reflect not only distinct state-society relations, but also different Naqshbandi-Salafi dynamics.[28]

Finally, not even IS fits in well with the picture of a deterritorizalized and depoliticized global Islam that is, in the final instance, nihilistic. First, as its very name indicates, it is

[27] Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (Harvard University Press 1994); *Globalized Islam: The search for a new Ummah* (Hurst 2004). A similar analysis of contemporary global Islam as driven by ethics rather than politics can be found in Faysal Devji, *Landscapes of the jihad* (London: Hurst 2005). For a recent overview of the different forms of Salafism, see the papers collected in R. Meijer (ed.) *Global Salafism* (London: Hurst 2009).

[28] Roy's attempt at dissolving all 'post-islamist' religiosity into purely political, and 'nihilist', motives appears to proceed from an a priori assumption that politics is essentially secular, and that, conversely, all religions are in essence apolitical. Considerations of space prexclude a fuller discussion of these points, however.

engaged in the political project of establishing a state. Second, despite its boasts about a struggle for the worldwide domination of true Islam, IS's main arena is actually a rather well-defined geographical area: those majority Sunni Arab populated parts of the Arab peninsula, and especially Northern Mesopotamia, that are marked by a power vacuum or a strong climate of resistance against the state. The fact that a number of jihadist groups in, among others, Libya and the Sinai desert have pledged allegiance to IS does not appear to mean much in terms of central organization or concrete collaboration. Third, despite the universalist rhetoric of establishing a caliphate for the entire *ummah*, or community of believers, IS mobilizes primarily among Sunni Arabs, generally meeting with indifference or even antagonism from other ethnic – let alone sectarian – groups. Figures presented by the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) in early 2015 indicate a total of just over 20,000 fighters, of whom a majority hail from the Arab world. An estimated 2,500 mujahedin come from Saudi Arabia alone, more than from all Western and Central European countries combined.[29] Thus, these figures indicate that one should not overstate the globalized character of IS mobilization and recruitment; nor should one necessarily see this globalization this conflict as something qualitatively novel. The estimated figure of some 20,000 foreign fighters is only slightly higher than the estimated number of foreign mujahedin in the Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s, and significantly lower than the number of foreigners presumed to have fought in the Spanish civil war (estimated at some 40,000 in total, although at no one point in time, more than 20,000 were actually involved in the struggle).[30] Most importantly, however, the ICSR figures are systematically misleading, in that they leave out the local fighters from IS-controlled areas in both Syria and Iraq, who in all likelihood constitute the vast majority of IS's rank and file. In other words, despite appearances. IS primarily appeals to, and mobilizes among, Sunni Arabs, especially in and from Syria and Iraq.[31] Despite

[29] http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/ (accessed February 7, 2105). One should be cautious about these figures, of course, many of which are no more than rough estimates based on sources of varying reliability. Moreover, not all foreigners are actively involved in fighting; especially the higher educated ones may also serve as medical doctors, engineers, judges, and of course publicity work through the various digital media; there are indications that other foreigners, being unfamiliar with either language, terrain, or military tactics, are simply used as cannon fodder in the guise of suicide bombers.

[30] Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (4th ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin 2001), p. 941.

[31] An exception may be the 'Naqshbandi Army', allegedly led by ex-Baathist and former Iraqi vice president Izzet al-Duri, which is claimed to incorporate members of Arab, Kurdish and Turcoman tribes.

openly expressed sympathies for IS in some Islamist circles (not to mention accumulating evidence of direct Turkish state support), the number of Turks actually joining IS is relatively low. Likewise, only a relatively small number of Kurds from Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran appear to have joined IS. Not much is known about their particular motivation; but the Iraqi Kurdish jihadists appear to hail primarily from the Halabja area, long known as a hotbed of Islamic activism, where much of the population had been disappointed with, or alienated by, the secular Kurdish leadership. Kurdish IS fighters from Turkey appear to come primarily from the Batman area, likewise an area with a long tradition of Islamist activism.

In other words, despite its megalomaniac and universalist Islamist rhetoric (or, one is tempted to say, branding), and despite its boasts of undoing the Sykes-Picot agreement, IS very much reproduces existing sectarian, ethnic, and national fault lines. With some oversimplification, one might say that in the propaganda battle waged by all warring sides, one may see the superimposition of, and mutual reinforcement, of existing distinctions between Kurds and Arabs, between Muslim and Christian, between Sunni and Shi'ite, between orthodox and heterodox, and, between Naqshbandi-inspired and Salafi-oriented forms of Sunni Islam. Last but not least, the propagandistic imagery Kurdish woman guerrillas on the one hand, and of IS markets and manuals for female slaves on the other, both equally eagerly reproduced in worldwide media, show to what extent gender and sexuality, too, have become weapons in the ongoing conflict.[32]

Reportedly, this militia was formed in 2006, in order to resist the American occupation and to protect Naqshbandis from the actions of al-Qaida in Iraq; but it was claimed to have joined with IS in the summer of 2014 for the conquest of Mosul. This alliance, however, seems more tactically than ideologically driven. Cf. http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/75 (accessed February 7, 2015).

[32] On this topic cf. my 'Iraq, IS and the Kurds: Redefining political, religious, and sexual boundaries', keynote lecture, ACMES convention, University of Amsterdam, January 2015.