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The Kurds and Islam

Martin van Bruinessen

After Turkish, Arabic and Persian, Kurdish is the fourth language of the Middle East in number of speakers.¹ Presently the Kurds number, by conservative estimate, 20 to 25 million, which makes them the largest stateless people of the Middle East. Numerous Kurds have played important roles in the history of Islam but this has often remained unnoticed because they did not explicitly identify themselves by their ethnic origins; when they expressed themselves in writing they usually did so in one (or more) of the three neighbour languages. Kurdistan, the mountainous region where most of the Kurds lived, has long been a buffer zone between the Turkish-, Arabic- and Persian-speaking regions of the Muslim world. Politically, Kurdistan constituted a periphery to each of these cultural-political regions, but it has also had the important cultural role of mediation between them. Learned Kurds have frequently acted as a bridge between different intellectual traditions in the Muslim world, and Kurdish `ulama have made major contributions to Islamic scholarship and Muslim literature in Arabic and Turkish as well as Persian.

Islam has, conversely, deeply affected Kurdish society; even ostensibly non-religious aspects of social and political life are moulded by it. As in other tribal societies, networks of *madrasas* and sufi orders have functioned as mechanisms of social integration, overcoming segmentary division. Not surprisingly it was in the *madrasa* environment, where students from various parts of Kurdistan met and where besides Arabic and Persian the Kurdish language was cultivated, that the idea of a Kurdish "national" identity first emerged. The first poets whose works expressed pride in the Kurdish heritage were closely associated with the *madrasa* and it was through the *madrasa* networks that their works were spread and became known. Sufi orders brought forth solidarities that cut across tribal and regional divisions. The first Kurdish uprisings with a nationalist aspect were almost without exception led by shaykhs of sufi orders.

Islam in Kurdistan has a distinctive character, born of the historic encounter of Kurdish society with Islamic teachings and practices and with Muslim states that incorporated parts of Kurdistan. The tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (which exists everywhere) is particularly marked in Kurdistan, and shall take an analysis of this tension as the starting point for my discussion of Islam as it exists among the Kurds.

¹ I use the term "Kurdish" in this paper in the wider sense that includes the related but distinct Zaza and Gurani languages, the speakers of which have long been part of larger Kurdish society and have commonly been considered as Kurds. In recent years there has been, among the Zaza, a tendency to assert their identity as distinct from the Kurds. For most of recorded history, however, Zaza, Gurani and Kurdish proper have been part of a single, if not homogeneous, cultural complex.

Orthodoxy and heterodoxy

Islam came to the Kurds in the early phases of its expansion, and the few urban centres in Kurdistan — such cities as Cizre, Arbil and Amid (Diyarbakir) — soon were integrated into the world of Islamic learning and civilisation. Because of its mountainous nature, however, most of Kurdistan remained peripheral to this world and maintained an ambivalent relationship with learned, orthodox Islam. On the one hand, some centres of orthodox Islamic learning emerged in even the most isolated places. On the other hand, however, it was in this physical environment that heterodox religious communities could survive longest and that groups and individuals that were persecuted for political or religious reasons sought refuge. (And, as elsewhere, political dissent and religious heterodoxy often went hand in hand).

Thus Kurdistan paradoxically became at once a centre of strict Sunni orthodoxy (adhering to the Shafī'i school of law rather than the more flexible Hanafī school that was adopted by most of the surrounding Arabs and Turks), and the home of some of the most heterodox communities of the Middle East. The Yezidi and Ahl-i Haqq religions emerged in central and southern Kurdistan respectively. Whereas the former has never had other than Kurdish adherents, the latter found wide acceptance among other ethnic groups in Iran but it is only in Kurdistan that it keeps resisting efforts to further islamise it. The belief system and practices of the Kizilbash or Alevis of present Turkey show many similarities with those of the Yezidis and the Ahl-i Haqq. Among the Alevis, too, the Kurdish communities are on the whole further removed from Islamic orthodoxy than the Turkish ones.

The paradox just mentioned is reflected in the existence of two mutually incompatible prejudices on the Kurds. One prejudice has it that the Kurds are staunch Sunnis and unyielding religious fanatics, another considers the Kurds as hardly islamised at all. "Compared to the unbeliever, (or, in another version, to the camel), the Kurd is a Muslim" is a saying encountered in various languages of the region. These prejudices must refer to different classes of Kurds, roughly speaking the urban and the nomadic or, in earlier times, the rural Kurds in general.

It is perhaps significant that the first Muslim scholar of Kurdish descent who is mentioned in Arabic sources, a certain Mahdi b. Maymun, who lived in Basra in the 2nd/8th century, is not described as a Kurd himself but as the son of a Kurd.² In the 3rd/9th century we find the similar case of a *hadith* scholar in Baghdad who was commonly known as "Ibn al-Kurdi".³ This appears to point to a certain incompatibility between being a Kurd and an

² Mahdi b. Maymun (d. 172/188-9) is mentioned in several early biographical dictionaries, the earliest being Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat* (ed. `Abbas), vol 7, p 280, where it is said that "(his father) Maymun was a Kurd" (*kāna Maymūn kurdiyyan*). Information kindly supplied by John Nawas (Utrecht University) from the "Netherlands Ulama Project" carried out jointly with Monique Bernards (Catholic University of Nijmegen).

³ Abu Nasr Muhammad, *mashhur bi-'bn al-Kurdi*. Mentioned in the *Ta'rikh Baghdad*, quoted in Baba Mardukh-Ruhani, *Tarikh-i Mashahir-i Kurd*, jild I (Tehran 1364/1985), p. 6.

urban *`alim* — in early Arabic sources the term "Kurd" appears to imply nomadism. Not much later, however, we find encounter several *`ulama* who are explicitly identified as Kurds.⁴ Later yet, we hear of religious centres in Kurdistan attracting students from elsewhere. One of the earliest Kurdish teachers to gain international renown was the Sufi, *`Ammar b. Yasir al-Bidlisi* (d. ca. 600/1200), who was the chief teacher of Najmuddin Kubra, the founder of the Kubrawiyya sufi order.⁵ *`Ammar* was part of a Sufi network that included Baghdad, Cairo and towns in Iran but he lived and taught in Bitlis.

Many Kurds claim that the popular saint *`Abd al-Qadir Gilani* (d. 561/1166), who gave the Qadiriyya Sufi order its name, was a Kurd too, hailing not from Gilan in Northern Iran (as is normally assumed) but from the district of the same name in Southern Kurdistan, to the West of Kermanshah. He spent most of his active life in Baghdad, however, and none of his contemporaries appears to have considered him as a Kurd. There are definite Kurdish links, though: *`Abd al-Qadir's* teacher's teacher was a certain *`Ali Hakkari* (d. 486/1093), from Hakkari in central Kurdistan,⁶ and an influential family of Kurdish *`ulama* and shaykhs claiming descent from *`Abd al-Qadir* later settled in Shemdinan near Hakkari.⁷ The Qadiriyya order has numerous followers in Kurdistan.

The case of shaykh *`Adi b. Musafir* (d. 557/1162) is especially interesting in that he constitutes a link between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Kurdistan. *`Adi* was born in Lebanon and studied in Baghdad, where he appears to have been acquainted with *`Abd al-Qadir Gilani*. He then chose to retreat to the Lalish valley in Central Kurdistan, where he established a Sufi community. From his extant writings it is clear that he was an orthodox

⁴ Mardukh-Ruhani, *Tarikh-i mashahir-i Kurd* lists several Kurdish *`ulama* for the first four centuries of Islam (pp. 1-20), but in most cases it is Mardûkh-Rûhânî who attributes Kurdish ethnicity to them, not his sources. A high proportion of them are from Dinawar, which does not necessarily make them Kurds. The earliest author explicitly identified as a Kurd in Carl Brockelmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* is Abu Yusuf Ya`qub b. A. al-Kurdi, who died in 474/1082 (GAL I, p. 287). He wrote a philological study, however, not a religious work.

⁵ On *`Ammar b. Yasir*, who himself was a student of Abu'l-Najib Suhrawardi, see: Fritz Meier, *Die Fawa'ih al-gamal wa-fawatih al-galal des Nagm ad-Din al-Kubra* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1957), pp. 19-23. Four centuries after his death, Shaykh *`Ammar b. Yasir* is proudly commemorated in the *Sharafnama*, written by the then prince of Bitlis, Sharaf Khan (ed. V. Véliaminof-Zernof, tome I, Petersburg, 1860, p. 342; trad. B. Charmoy, tome II/1, Petersburg 1873, p. 208).

⁶ For a brief biographical notice on *`Ali Hakkari*, see: Mardukh-Ruhani, *Tarikh-i mashahir-i Kurd*, jild I, p. 31. Many centuries later we encounter *`ulama* in Kurdistan who pride themselves upon descent from this illustrious sufi, thus for instance the 18th-century mystic Shems-i Bitlisi (M. Kemal Gündogdu & Azmi Gündogdu, *Sems-i Bitlisi*, Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1992, p. 4).

⁷ On this family, the Gilanzade or "seyyids of Nehri", see: Basile Nikitine, *Les Kurdes: étude sociologique et historique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1956), pp. 211-4; Martin van Bruinessen, "The Sadate Nehri or Gilanzade of Central Kurdistan", *Journal for the History of Sufism* no. 1 (2000).

Sunni Muslim. In the course of time, however, his shrine became the chief sanctuary of the Yezidis, and Shaykh `Adi himself the incarnation of the holiest spirit in their pantheon.⁸ Modern Yezidis find it extremely disconcerting to hear orientalists proclaim that Shaykh `Adi did not preach their religion but Sunni Islam, the religion in the name of which they have suffered much oppression.

Shaykh `Adi is not unique in this respect. The shrine that is held most sacred by the Ahl-i Haqq is that of the saint Baba Yadigar at the village of Sarane in the Dalehu mountains west of Kermanshah. Baba Yadigar is [the incarnation of] one of the *haft tan*, the seven angelic beings who manifest themselves in the world in each cycle of Ahl-i Haqq sacred history. According to Ahl-i Haqq myths, Yadigar was the spiritual son and successor of Sultan Sahak, the founder of the religion, who is himself considered as an incarnation of God. There is some indication, however, that in his lifetime Baba Yadigar was considered as a Sufi shaykh. There exists a *waqf* document that records a grant of land made to him in 933/1526 by a Sunni Kurd and that was drawn up in a shari`a court in the presence of Muslim witnesses.⁹ As for Sultan Sahak, Ahl-i Haqq myths make him the son of a certain Sayyid `Isa, who together with his brother Musa had come from Hamadan and settled in the Hawraman district. Interestingly, the Barzinji family, the most influential family of (Sunni) shaykhs and scholars of southern Kurdistan, traces its pedigree to the same Sayyid `Isa.¹⁰

Both Yezidism and the Ahl-i Haqq religion thus appear to have emerged from a community of possibly quite orthodox Sufis living in the midst of a population that held on to pre-Islamic (predominantly Iranian) religious beliefs and practices. These Sufi communities probably exerted a certain Islamicising influence on their wider environment, but over the next generations they adopted more and more local elements (as well as, possibly, other "foreign" elements¹¹) into the belief systems and rituals, resulting in the present distinct religious formations.

Similar "relapses" of orthodox communities into heterodoxy have been recorded as recently as the present century. They took place in several local branches of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order, which generally is strongly *shari`a*-oriented. The tendency, in

⁸ Rudolf Frank, *Scheich `Adi, der grosse Heilige der Jezîdis* (Berlin, 1911); Philip Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism - its background, observances and textual tradition* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Research Publications, 1995).

⁹ M. Mokri, "Étude d'un titre de propriété du début du XVIe siècle provenant du Kurdistan", in: M. Mokri, *Contribution scientifique aux études iraniennes* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1970), pp. 303-330.

¹⁰ The genealogy of the Barzinji family is reproduced in summary form in: C.J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs* (Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 69-71. Edmonds also discusses a family tree of Kaka'i (Ahl-i Haqq) sayyids who claim descent from Sultan Sahak and therefore from Sayyid `Isa (*ibid.*, pp. 188-9). Cf. M. Ra'uf Tawakkuli, *Tarikh-i tasawwuf dar Kurdistan* (Tehran, s.d.[c. 1980]), pp. 133-157.

¹¹ Jean-Paul Roux has drawn attention to the presence in Ahl-i Haqq mythology of religious ideas that appear to have Turkish origins: "Les Fidèles de Vérité et les croyances religieuses turcs", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 175 (1969), 61-95.

many of the Kurdish branches, for the position of shaykh to be hereditary isolated them from the larger Naqshbandi network, which obviously facilitated such "relapses." Several of the shaykhs of Barzan declared themselves the *mahdi* and led anti-state rebellions; in the 1920s Shaykh Ahmad (whom hostile sources described as "half-mad") was reported to have declared himself god and permitted the consumption of pork.¹² The latter should perhaps be seen as an instance of the reversal of ordinary behaviour that often accompanies messianic movements. Even stronger antinomian tendencies surfaced among the followers of another Naqshbandi shaykh, `Abd al-Karim of Sargelu in the Sulaymani region: men and women were seen bathing together in the mosque pond, allowing even dogs into the water (a clear reversal of the Muslim concept of ritual purity); men dressed up as women; goods as well as women were declared common property within the community. This branch of the order has developed into a distinct heterodox sect, known as Haqqa, which survives until the present day.¹³

In the early 16th century most of Kurdistan came under Ottoman control, following a turbulent period during which it had changed hands between successive nomadic empires, from Karakoyunlu to Akkoyunlu to the nascent Safavid state of the charismatic Shaykh Isma`il. In the confrontation that took place between the (Sunni) Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim I and the heterodox *Kizilbash* (as Shaykh Isma`il's followers were called, because of their red head-dress), most of the rulers of local Kurdish principalities threw in their weight with the Ottomans. In exchange for a high degree of autonomy they accepted formal suzerainty of the Ottoman sultan and joined in military action against the Kizilbash.¹⁴

Ottoman chroniclers unanimously claim that the Kurds allied themselves with the Ottomans because they were staunch Sunni Muslims and therefore fiercely hostile to the heterodox Safavids. This claim is, I believe, to be taken with a large grain of salt. Most later accounts of the events depend heavily upon that given by the person who had brokered the agreements between the Kurdish dynasties and the Ottoman Empire, the scholar-diplomat Idris Bitlisi. Bitlisi, a Kurd himself, may have over-emphasised the Kurds' orthodoxy in order to convince the sultan of their political loyalties. We find the same insistence on the Kurds' being staunch Sunnis in the *Sharafnama*, written almost a century later by the Kurdish prince Sharaf Khan of Bitlis. Sharaf Khan had spent part of his life in Iran in the service of the Safavids, before submitting to the sultan and being allowed to return to Bitlis; he had good

¹² B. Nikitine, "Les Kurdes racontés par eux-mêmes", *L'Asie française* No. 231 (mai 1925), pp. 148-157; Hassan Arfa, *The Kurds, an historical and political study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 117-8.

¹³ There are some first-hand observations in: C.J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 204-6. Cf. Mistefa `Eskerî, *Awirdaneweyek le bizûtnewey "Heqe"* (A look at the Haqqa movement), ed. by Mihemmedî Mela Kerîm (Baghdad: `Alâ, 1983).

¹⁴ See Martin van Bruinessen, "The Ottoman conquest of Diyarbekir and the administrative organisation of the province in the 16th and 17th centuries", in: M. van Bruinessen and H. Boeschoten, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 13-28; idem, *Agha, shaikh and state: the social and political structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), pp. 131-161.

reason to emphasise that religious loyalties bound the Kurds to the Ottomans. In fact, however, there are indications that not only were there numerous Yezidis among the Kurds in the 16th century but also many adherents of other heterodox sects, including Kizilbash.¹⁵

Presently a significant proportion of the Kurds of Turkey are Kizilbash-Alevi. A deep social cleavage nowadays separates the Kurdish Alevi from the Sunni Kurds, but the boundary between Sunnis and Alevi appears to have been much less sharply defined in the past and crossings of the boundary relatively frequent. Like the more numerous Turkish Alevi, the Alevi Kurds consist of a number of distinct subgroups — distinct with regard to their rituals and beliefs as well as the degree of accommodation with formal Islam. There exists yet other Kizilbash offshoots in another part of Kurdistan, the elusive Shabak community of the Mosul district and the Kizilbash of Kirkuk district. In spite of their isolation from the Anatolian Alevi and their intensive social interaction with Ahl-i Haqq and Yezidis, the Shabak have maintained their Kizilbash identity and the same appears to be true of the community in Kirkuk that still bears the same name.¹⁶

Both in belief and in ritual there are remarkable similarities between the Kizilbash-Alevi religion (especially as it exists among the Kurds) and the Yezidi and Ahl-i Haqq religions. In all three, moreover, essential ritual functions can only be performed by religious specialists from sacred lineages that claim descent from saints associated with the founding myths of these religions. The Ahl-i Haqq of southern Kurdistan were in contact with both Yezidis and Alevi and have borrowed some elements from both into their own beliefs and repertory of myths; some Alevi communities appear to have borrowed much from Yezidism. All three appear to draw upon a number of older religious traditions.¹⁷

The Kurds and non-Muslim minorities in Kurdistan

Kurdistan always was, like much of the Middle East, an ethnic and religious mosaic, in which nomads, peasants and townspeople, speakers of various languages and numerous dialects, adherents of Islam, Christianity and Judaism and a plethora of syncretistic religious communities lived side by side. Kurdish speaking Sunni Muslims constituted the majority,

¹⁵ See Martin van Bruinessen, "'Aslımı inkar eden haramzadedir!': the debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevi", in: K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele and A. Otter-Beaujean (eds), *Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 1-23.

¹⁶ The most important source on the Shabak is: `Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraf, *Al-Shabak min firqat al-ghulât fi'l-`Irâq* (Baghdad: Matba`at al-Ma`arif, 1954); cf. van Bruinessen, "The Shabak, a Kizilbash community in Iraqi Kurdistan", *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam* 5 (1998), 185-196. On the Kizilbash of Kirkuk, see Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs*, pp. 268-9.

¹⁷ The similarities between Yezidism and Ahl-i Haqq, and to some extent also Alevism, are investigated in: Philip G. Kreyenbroek, "On the study of some heterodox sects in Kurdistan", *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam* 5 (1998), 163-184.

but everywhere they has neighbours of other creeds and tongues. In northern Kurdistan, Armenians were very prominent and in some districts even constituted majorities. The relations between Kurdish pastoralists and Armenian peasants were unequal but symbiotic.¹⁸ In Central and Western Kurdistan there were sizeable communities of Aramaic-speaking Christians belonging to the Eastern and Western Syrian churches (known in Europe as Assyrians or Nestorians and Jacobites, respectively).¹⁹ These communities were in many ways the equals of their Muslim neighbours. Those of central Kurdistan had tribal organisation and until the early 19th century constituted a significant force, that was an active factor in Kurdish politics. Most Kurdish towns also had small Jewish communities, and some places such as Zakho, Başkale and Barzan were in fact home to large Jewish populations.

The Christian communities were probably as heterogeneous as the Muslims were, and heterodoxies were probably just as widespread among them. The Paulician heresy, which emerged among the Armenians of present North-Western Kurdistan in the 8th century and was crushed by the Byzantines in the 9th, is only the best-known among them.²⁰ Christian and Jewish elements that observers have claimed to discern in the Alevi or Ahl-i Haqq religions are likely not to derive from the "high" forms of these religions but from their popular variants. Ethnic and religious "conversions" probably were relatively frequent, if we may assume that only a fraction of them has been recorded in writing. Carsten Niebuhr remarked in the 18th century that many adherents of the Shemsi sect (of which very little is known) converted to the Jacobite church, as later numerous Yezidis were to do.²¹ The fact that many Armenians and Jacobites had Kurdish as their mother tongues also suggests a history of conversion. In the Dersim district many Armenians converted to Alevism, but there was also a brief reflux from Alevism to Christianity when foreign missionaries appeared to be offering protection.

The arrival of missionaries in Kurdistan — Roman Catholics first, followed in the 19th century by Protestants of various denominations — made the religious mosaic even more complex as new ethno-religious communities emerged. The East Syrian communities

¹⁸ Helmut Christoff, *Kurden und Armenier: eine Untersuchung über die Abhängigkeit ihrer Lebensformen und Charakterentwicklung von der Landschaft*. Diss. Hamburg, 1935.

¹⁹ John Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim neighbours* (Princeton University Press, 1961); Michel Chevalier, *Les montagnards chrétiens du Hakkari et du Kurdistan septentrional* (Département de Géographie de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1985); John Joseph, *Muslim-Christian relations and inter-Christian rivalries in the Middle East: the case of the Jacobites in an age of transition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983).

²⁰ Until as recently as the early 19th century there existed a heterodox Armenian community known as Thonraki in the district of Muş, whom scholars believed to be an offshoot of the Paulicians. What we know of this sect is based on a single written text that has been preserved. See: Fred. C. Conybeare, *The Key of Truth, a manual of the Paulician church of Armenia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898).

²¹ Carsten Niebuhr, *Reize naar Arabië en andere omliggende landen*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam, 1780), p. 376-8 (Dutch translation of vol. 3 of *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern*, Copenhagen, 1778).

that united themselves with the Roman Catholic church came to be known as Chaldaeans; later we find Catholic and Protestant Armenians besides those of the Gregorian church, and Catholic and Protestant West Syrians besides the Jacobites. Increased missionary activity was an aspect of the increasing influence of the European powers in the region, and it was perceived as such by both Christians and Muslims. The local Christians were less and less inclined to acquiesce in their traditional subordinate positions. As a result, the relations between Muslims and Christians became more antagonistic. The state and urban Muslims in the region, moreover, were suspicious that the Christians might collaborate with foreign enemies.

A series of armed clashes and pogroms was set into motion that was to culminate in the Armenian massacres of 1915 and ultimately resulted in the almost complete ethnic cleansing (or conversion) of Christians. The Armenian massacres of 1894-96, which constituted a crucial phase in this process, have often been attributed to the Hamidiye, Kurdish militia forces established by Sultan Abdulhamid II. Recent research emphasises the role of *urban* Muslims of the region in the massacres, a group with an ambiguous ethnic identity.²² The mass deportations and genocide of 1915 effectively eliminated the Armenian communities from Kurdistan. The Nestorian Assyrians of central Kurdistan also left their mountain strongholds for Iran that year. The British recruited them into a force first to fight the Ottomans and later, resettling them in northern Iraq, turned them into a police force used, inter alia, against Kurdish insurgencies. Massacres in 1933 (by local Kurds and Iraqi nationalist army officers) decimated their numbers and destroyed them as a military force. The West Syrians suffered much in the World War too, and after the creation of Syria many crossed the border from Turkey to settle there. The remaining community in the Tur Abdin mountains lost its most dynamic members due to labour migration to Germany and became very vulnerable to oppression by its Muslim neighbours, which caused mass flight from the region.²³

Unlike the Christians, the Jews of Kurdistan were (until the establishment of the state of Israel) not considered as potential collaborators with foreign powers, nor were their numbers such that they ever represented a significant force. Their relations with the Kurds were on the whole friendly though unequal, and their departure for Israel around 1950 was not due to the treatment by their Kurdish neighbours. Significantly, the Kurdistan Jewish community in Israel has strong pro-Kurdish sentiments.²⁴

²² Jelle Verheij, "Les frères de terre et d'eau": sur le rôle des Kurdes dans les massacres arméniens de 1894-1896", *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam* 5 (1998), 225-276.

²³ Martin van Bruinessen, "The Christians of Eastern Turkey, the state and the local power structure", *ICMC Migration News* no. 3-4 (1979), 40-46; Helga Anschutz, *Die syrischen Christen vom Tur `Abdin, eine altchristliche Bevölkerungsgruppe zwischen Beharrung, Stagnation und Auflösung* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1984).

²⁴ The most comprehensive study of the history and culture of the Kurdistan Jews is the work by Erich Brauer (completed and edited by Raphael Patai), *The Jews of Kurdistan* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1993).

The East and West Syrian communities have reconstituted themselves in well-organised diasporas in Europe and North America. A secular, unified Assyrian movement that attempts to integrate both communities into one nation and promotes the ideal of returning to Mesopotamia has emerged in Europe and has engaged in a debate with the Kurdish movement about issues of ethnic, religious and political pluralism.²⁵ The Kurdish movement has made a few gestures towards the Assyrian movement: both the autonomous parliament of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdish Parliament in Exile have Assyrian representatives, and the Kurdish satellite television station Med-TV has added Aramaic-language news broadcasts to its programs.

Islamic learning in Kurdistan and relations with the wider Muslim world

Geography has made Kurdistan a political buffer zone between neighbouring empires — from c. 1500 on between the heartlands of the Ottoman Empire and Safavid, later Qajar Iran. It was also a zone of transition between the regions where the three major languages of Islam, Arabic, Persian and Turkish were spoken and written. Like Kurdish tribal chieftains and princelings, Kurdish `ulama necessarily oriented themselves towards their more powerful neighbours. Many knew besides Kurdish and Arabic also Persian and/or Turkish, which enabled them to act as cultural brokers between the cultural regions defined by these languages. Their careers often took them to more than one of these regions.

One example of a Kurdish `alim with an "international" career was the famous Molla Gürani (d. 1488). He was born in Shahrazur in southern Kurdistan and received his early training from local teachers. Coming of age, he went to seek knowledge in Baghdad, Diyarbakir, Hisn Kayfa, Damascus, Jerusalem and Cairo — cities that were controlled by different political powers. Following his departure from Egypt he was invited to enter the service of the Ottoman state, becoming tutor to Prince Mehmed, the future Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, and ultimately reaching the highest religious position in the Empire, becoming the first *mufti* of Istanbul. Other Kurdish `ulama settled as teachers in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where they could play their role as cultural brokers between the Persian-speaking, the Turkish and the Arabic-speaking world most effectively. Elsewhere I have discussed the impact these Kurdish `ulama had on one distant part of the Muslim world, Southeast Asia.²⁶

In cities in or near Kurdistan such as Diyarbakir, Hisn Kayfa, Miyafarqin (Silvan), Mardin, Mosul and Erbil we find majestic old *madradas*, some of which were built as early as the

²⁵ The development of this pan-Assyrian movement can be traced in four recently founded journals: *Nsibin* (published in Sweden), *Furkono* (Sweden), *Hammurabi* (France) and *Renyo Hiro* (Switzerland).

²⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, "The impact of Kurdish `ulama on Indonesian Islam", *Les Annales de l'autre islam* 5 (1998), 83-106.

12th to 14th centuries. In most cases these were built by non-Kurdish dynasties ruling these cities and the wider region. Thus members of the (Turkish) Artukid dynasty established the Sitti Radviye or Hatuniye (12th c.) and the Zinciriye (14th c.), and a number of other madrasas in Mardin and the Mes`udiye madrasa (12th-13th c.) in Diyarbakir. Diyarbakir's Zinciriye madrasa is variously attributed to a 12th-century Artukid or a 13th-century ruler of the (Kurdish) Ayyubid dynasty. Later dynasties governing the region added their own madrasas.²⁷ It was these madrasas that attracted such students as Molla Gürani, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. We find them mentioned in the biographies of Arab, Turkish and Persian as well as Kurdish `ulama. These state madrasas were primarily geared to the education of `ulama who would at one stage or another enter government service as judges (*qadi*), jurisconsults (*mufti*) or teachers (*mudarris*). Under Ottoman rule, these madrasas came to be incorporated into a centrally administered organisation, with a more or less fixed curriculum and career patterns that guaranteed the mobility of students and teachers from one part of the Empire to another.²⁸ Even though located in Kurdistan, there was not much specifically Kurdish about them.

The rulers of the Kurdish emirates that retained autonomy within the Ottoman Empire established their own madrasas, which appear to have remained outside the Ottoman educational and career system. Especially Bitlis, Cizre and Amadiye were major centres of learning, that produced `ulama of fame.²⁹ Because the Kurds adhere to the Shafi`i *madhhab* (school of Muslim law) whereas the official *madhhab* in the Ottoman Empire was that of Abu Hanifa, the curriculum in these Kurdish madrasas must have been considerably different from that in the Ottoman madrasas, at least as far as *fiqh* (jurisprudence) was concerned.

Another difference between these Kurdish madrasas and the Ottoman madrasas in general was the place given to the Kurdish language — at least in the 17th century, when a number of authors associated with these madrasas brought about a flowering of Kurdish literature. (Earlier generations had written exclusively in Arabic or Persian.) Molla Ahmad Ceziri (Meleyê Ehmedê Cezîrî), who taught in the Red Madrasa (*Medresa Sor*) of Cizre, is the author of a celebrated *divan* of Kurdish metaphysical poetry that has often been compared with that of Hafiz. Ahmad-i Khani (Ehmedê Xanî, d. 1706/7) adapted a popular

²⁷ Nejat Göyünç, *XVI. yüzyilda Mardin sancagi* (Istanbul: I.Ü. Edebiyat Fak., 1969), pp. 114-6; Sevkett Beysanoglu, *Anitlar ve kitabeleri ile Diyarbakir tarihi*. 1. cilt: *Baslangıçtan Akkoyunlular'a kadar* (Ankara, 1987), pp. 331-4. Cf. Martin van Bruinessen, "Religious life in Diyarbakir: Islamic learning and the role of the tariqats", in: van Bruinessen & Boeschoten, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbakir*, pp. 45-52.

²⁸ İ.H. Uzunçarşılı *Osmanlı devletinin ilmiye teşkilâtı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1965); Richard Repp, "Some observations on the development of the Ottoman learned hierarchy", in: Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), *Scholars, saints and Sufis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 17-32.

²⁹ Some of the *madrasas* established in Cizre by the local ruling house are discussed in: Abdullah Yaşin, *Bütün yönleriyle Cizre* (Cizre: Dicle Kitapevi, 1983); those of Bitlis in: M. Oluş Arık, *Bitlis yapılarında Selçuklu rönesansı* (Ankara: Selçuklu Tarih ve Medeniyeti Enstitüsü, 1971).

romance, *Mem û Zîn*, into his long poem of the same name, a work of great literary refinement with multiple layers of meaning, that was adopted by later generations as the Kurdish national epic. Besides this literary work, Khani wrote two texts for use in elementary teaching: a Arabic-Kurdish dictionary in verse form, titled *Nûbihar*, and a simple catechism in Kurdish, *Eqîda îman*. Ceziri and Khani are the most famous Kurdish authors of this period, but they are by no means the only ones. The famous Turkish traveller, Evliya Çelebi, who visited several of these Kurdish emirates in the mid-17th century, gives lively descriptions of the cultural and religious life in Bitlis, Cizre and Amadiye and speaks of `ulama writing Kurdish poetry.³⁰

Besides the state madrasas and those sponsored by the Kurdish autonomous ruling houses, there has long been yet another category of madrasa in Kurdistan, the more modest but more independent schools attached to some of the village mosques and led by mullas who had gained a reputation for learning. These madrasas did not educate their students for official positions but to become mullas (*mele, mela*) serving the village and town population. They played a major role in the emergence of Kurdish national awareness and in integrating different parts of Kurdistan; the students of each madrasa came from a variety of regional and social backgrounds, tribal ties were irrelevant, the Kurdish language was cultivated.³¹

The second flowering of Kurdish letters, which began in the 19th century and in southern Kurdistan this time, was closely associated with the world of these madrasas. Both the first of the nationalist poets in Sorani Kurdish, Haji Qadrî Koyî, and the greatest of the religious poets, Mewlewî and Mahwî, emerged from this environment and found there their first readers. Mewlewî's poems, written in a Gurani dialect, are to this day very popular with Kurdish mullas. It is interesting to note that, although he is considered as an orthodox Muslim author, some of the ideas expressed in his works are reminiscent of those of the Ahl-i Haqq, e.g. a belief in reincarnation.

Another remarkable man who emerged from the Kurdish madrasa world, in northern Kurdistan, was Said Nursi (Sa`id-i Nursi, 1876-1960), who became best known as the author of original and influential pious writings and the progenitor of Turkey's Nurcu movement. There is a less well-known side of Said's personality, that of a Kurd with a firm commitment to the uplifting of his people from their general backwardness. The early part of his career,

³⁰ An important part of Evliya's travels in Kurdistan is missing in the published *Seyahatname* (Book of Travels), which was based on a defective manuscript. The sections dealing with Bitlis have been published satisfactorily: Robert Dankoff, *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis* (Leiden: Brill, 1990). For an evaluation of the other sections on Kurdistan, see my "Kurdistan in the 16th and 17th centuries, as reflected in Evliya Çelebi's *Seyahatname*", *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* 3 (2000), 1-11.

³¹ An interesting description of the traditional Kurdish *madrasas* as they existed in Turkish Kurdistan until the 1970s and of the curriculum is given by Zeynelabidin Zinar in his *Xwendina medresê* (Stockholm: Pencinar, 1993), of which an edited translation into English appeared in *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam* 5 (1998). Much interesting information is also to be found in a special issue on the *madrasa* of the Kurdish monthly journal *Nûbihar*, no. 63/64 (Istanbul, June/July 1998).

during which he was a fiery debater and an activist better known as *Sa'id-i Kurdi* and was actively involved in the Kurdish nationalist associations and a Kurdish school in Istanbul of the 1900s and 1910s is an aspect of his biography that has long been suppressed by the leadership of the Nurcu movement, to the extent of their censoring Said's writings and airbrushing major activities away from his biography. Said Nursi was an unusual and unique personality, but in combining a firm commitment to Islam with a deep concern with the Kurdish people he reflected an attitude that was rather widespread among Kurdish mullas.

Soon after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the government ordered traditional madrasas to be closed. The ban appears to have been quite effective in western Turkey but less so in the Kurdish East, where many madrasas continued functioning clandestinely until the 1970s. The ban in fact may have strengthened the association of the madrasa with Kurdish identity, which was suppressed at the same time.³² Kurdish mullas were prominent among those who kept an awareness of Kurdish identity alive during the years when the state most forcefully imposed cultural assimilation.

Sufi orders and their social and political roles

Sufi orders have been prominently present in Kurdistan, and the Sufi shaykh is perhaps more representative of Kurdish Islam than the legal expert. Most of the best-known `ulama in Kurdish history were Sufis, and many of these Sufis acquired considerable political influence. Various Sufi orders were present in Kurdistan at one time or another, but for the past few centuries the scene has been dominated by the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya.³³ The orders have at certain moments played important social and political roles in Kurdistan, because they represent a pattern of social organisation independent of the tribes (as well as the state).

At one level, a Sufi order is like an informal school offering a standardised package of spiritual exercises and mystical techniques, which the novice practices under experienced

³² Turkish parents who wished their son to have a traditional madrasa education had to send him to Kurdistan, as some actually did. One of these Turkish graduates of a Kurdish madrasa, Turan Dursun, wrote a fascinating book about his experiences there (*Kulleteyn*, Istanbul: Akyüz, 1990). Dursun, who had become an atheist and anti-religious polemicist, writes with disdain about the backwardness of this milieu, but the quality of his polemics (published in a series of books titled *Tabu can çekisiyor: din bu*, "A taboo in its death throes: this is religion", Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları) shows that his training in the religious sciences at least was solid.

³³ Martin van Bruinessen, "Religious life in Diyarbekir: Islamic learning and the role of the tariqats", in: van Bruinessen & Boeschoten, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir*; idem, "The Naqshbandi order in 17th-century Kurdistan", in: M. Gaborieau, A. Popovic et Th. Zarccone (éd.), *Naqshbandis: cheminements et situation actuelle d'un ordre mystique musulman* (Istanbul / Paris: Isis, 1990), pp. 337-360; idem, "Shaikhs: mystics, saints and politicians", in: M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, shaikh and state: the social and political structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), pp. 203-264; M. Ra'uf Tawakkuli, *Tarikh-i tasawwuf dar Kurdistan* (Tehran, s.d.[c. 1980]).

guidance. These techniques have been developed by the founding fathers of the orders but are believed to be based on teachings handed down orally from the Prophet himself. Only the most accomplished mystics are allowed to teach these exercises; they are known as *murshid* ("guide") or, in Kurdistan, as shaykh. This is not an informal title: one only becomes a shaykh with a written certificate (*ijaza*) from his own teacher; a long period of training under the master's supervision is only one of the conditions, and an *ijaza* is not given automatically.

In Kurdistan, we find around a shaykh various categories of followers. The most devoted disciples (*murid*) live with the shaykh, in his house, in a *zawiya* (dervish convent) or at least as close to him as possible, and they take part daily in communal recitations and meditations. There is a wider circle of *murids*, who have also been initiated into the order and who come together more or less regularly for communal devotions led by the shaykh or his representative (*khalifa*). Shaykhs with *murids* living in distant places generally appoint one or more *khalifas* from among their most advanced disciples. A much wider group of followers does not take active part in the mystical exercises and may not even be initiated into the order but is attracted to the shaykh's charisma. Unlike the `ulama, many shaykhs perform pastoral and thaumaturgic functions. They are consulted on moral and political matters, act as healers of mental and physical illnesses, pacify quarreling relatives. Their very presence is believed to convey blessing, and they are believed to have the power of intercession with God.

There has been a tendency in Kurdistan for the position of shaykhs to be hereditary. All Qadiri shaykhs in Southern Kurdistan belong to only two families, the Barzinji and the Talabani. The Naqshbandi order expanded rapidly in the early 19th century, partly at the expense of the Qadiriyya, precisely because many persons who were not the sons of shaykhs were given *ijazas*. The highly charismatic Mawlana Khalid, a Kurd from the Sulaymaniya region, who had studied with one of the greatest Indian Naqshbandi teachers, trained a large number of disciples and appointed well over thirty shaykhs to various parts of Kurdistan (besides an even larger number of *khalifas* appointed to other parts of the Ottoman Empire). In the following generations, however, the tendency towards hereditary shaykhhood showed itself also among Kurdish Naqshbandis. As a result, certain branches of the orders developed almost into tribes. The Barzanis constitute perhaps the most radical example of this process. The shaykhs of Barzan attracted followers from various origins, some of them tribal but most of them non-tribal peasants, who already lived in or near the shaykhs' village of Barzan or later settled there. The community distinguished itself by a strong sense of egalitarianism and willingness to accept outsiders as members, but in the course of conflicts with the surrounding tribes it came to behave very much like a tribe itself. The Haqqa community mentioned above constitutes another case.

The Naqshbandi order not only expanded rapidly in the first half of the 19th century, its political importance also increased. By the end of the century we find that in many parts of Kurdistan Naqshbandi shaykhs held positions of great influence. This was related to other major political developments of the period. In the first decades of the century, administrative

reforms abolished the last remaining autonomous Kurdish principalities and brought all of Kurdistan under centrally appointed administrators. These governors lacked the moral authority that the Kurdish emirs had had, and they could not keep tribal conflicts in check as the emirs had done. The following decades were characterised by a marked decrease of public security and a corresponding rise in violence and conflict. The sense of insecurity was exacerbated by a series of Ottoman military defeats at the hands of European powers and by the conspicuous activities of European missionaries among the local Christian communities. It was this situation which thrust the shaykhs into the role of intermediaries in conflicts. Precisely because their authority was independent of tribal affiliation and their followings cut across tribal boundaries, the shaykhs were well-placed to resolve conflicts, either through mediating between conflicting parties or by simply imposing a solution upon them. Some of these shaykhs developed into astute political operators, who succeeded in imposing their authority on even the largest tribal chieftains of their regions. They ultimately became the most widely accepted spokesmen for the Kurds as a whole.³⁴

It is not a coincidence that many of the early Kurdish uprisings with a nationalist dimension were led by Sufi shaykhs: the large rebellions of Shaykh `Ubaydullah (1880) and the shaykhs of Barzan in central Kurdistan, Shaykh Sa`id (1925) in the North, and Shaykh Mahmud Barzinji (1919, 1922 and 1931) in southern Kurdistan, and several minor uprisings.³⁵ For a long time, secular nationalists had to enter into alliances with such shaykhs because only the latter could mobilise the masses. And this was not only true in times of rebellion. Shaykh `Ubaydullah's son, Sayyid `Abd al-Qadir, who settled in Istanbul after the Young Turk revolution of 1908, played a leading role in the first Kurdish associations that were established there, and he was the only leader to whom the Kurdish working class of Istanbul would listen; the secular nationalists with their modern education were completely cut off from this constituency.

The Sufi orders have in this century been severely criticised from various quarters: by Muslim reformists, modernisation-oriented secular politicians and Kurdish nationalist intellectuals. Said Nursi, whose teachers included a Naqshbandi shaykh and whose own writings breathe a mystical spirit, rejected the orders as they functioned in Kurdistan, the magical and superstitious practises that were associated with them, and the irrational veneration of hereditary shaykhs. (The Nurcu movement, in which his followers are organised, is often called a *tarik* or Sufi order in Turkey, but it has no hereditary leadership nor does it engage in *dhikr* or other communal recitations.)

The secular Young Turks and their Kemalist successors considered the Sufi orders as

³⁴ An attempt at sociological explanation is presented in much greater detail in my *Agha, shaikh and state*.

³⁵ For Shaykh `Ubaydullah's and Shaykh Sa`id's rebellions, see: Robert Olson, *The emergence of Kurdish nationalism and the Sheikh Said rebellion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); for Shaykh Ahmad Barzani and Shaykh Mahmud: David MacDowall, *A modern history of the Kurds* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1996); for the earlier Barzani shaykhs: Nikitine, "Les Kurdes racontés par eux-mêmes".

hotbeds of superstition and reaction, obstacles in the way of progress. The association of certain shaykhs with Kurdish nationalism was reason for even greater suspicion. The Shaykh Sa'id rebellion was the last straw. Within months, the Turkish government banned all Sufi orders. The ban hurt especially the urban orders, which had to suspend their activities. Paradoxically, some of the Kurdish shaykhs, especially those who cooperated with the state, could maintain their influential social positions. The transition to multi-party democracy and general elections in the wake of the Second World War transformed the shaykhs into major vote-getters for the conservative parties, and several Kurdish shaykhs became members of parliament. In the post-war period, some of the severest critics of the Kurdish shaykhs were Kurdish secular intellectuals, who blamed them for keeping the village population ignorant, economically exploiting it, and selling out to the state.³⁶

The ban of the orders in Turkey was gradually less strictly observed, and by the mid-1980s the orders could virtually function publicly again. The association of the Naqshbandiyya with Kurdish ethnicity had loosened, especially in the transition zone where Turkish and Kurdish, Sunni and Alevi populations met. Several Kurdish shaykhs in this zone, in fact, affiliated themselves from the mid-1970s on with the pan-Turk, fascist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), even though in some cases their followers are still predominantly Kurdish. Other Kurdish shaykhs have attracted important numbers of non-Kurdish disciples. Several Kurdish branches of the Naqshbandiyya are now also represented in Istanbul, either because the shaykh himself moved there or because a group of followers who did so organised themselves.³⁷

When the Sufi orders were banned in Turkey, quite a few Kurdish shaykhs migrated to Syria, which under the French mandate followed more liberal Islamic and Kurdish policies than its northern neighbour did. North-Eastern Syria, where many other Kurds settled who for one reason or another had to leave Turkey, has a very high density of shaykhs per unit of population. Some of them still have large numbers of followers in the Turkish part of Kurdistan and make, since this has become possible again, annual tours through the districts north of the border.

³⁶ An early critique was that by Mehmet Emin Bozarslan, *Islâmiyet açısından seyhlik-ağalık* (Ankara: Toplum Yayınevi, 1964). One of the Kurdish shaykhs, the foreign-educated Kasim Küfrevi, was the butt of sharp mockery in a brilliant anonymous poem (written by Kemal Burkay) that was published by the Kurdish nationalist press in exile: "Serpêhatiyên Şêx Qasim", in *Helbestên Kurdî* (Zürich: Ronahî, 1972?). The Kurdish left of the 1970s shared the disdain of the Kemalists for anything religious; it considered the shaykhs as feudal exploiters and obscurantists, see e.g. the series of articles by C. Aladağ, "Milli mesele ve Kürdistan'da feodalite-aşiret" in the monthly *Özgürlük Yolu*, starting in July 1975.

³⁷ Perhaps the most influential of the Kurdish shaykhs who settled in Istanbul was Abdülhakim Arvasi. He is the progenitor of the Işıkcı branch of the Naqshbandiyya, thus named after his disciple Hüseyin Hilmi Işık, a successful organiser.

Religious versus ethnic nationalism

To many pious Sunni Muslim Kurds, Islam is an essential element of Kurdish identity. They do not consider the Yezidis as proper Kurds, even though most Yezidis know only Kurdish. Kurdish or Zaza-speaking Alevi too are sometimes denied recognition as fellow Kurds. This has not always been the dominant view; Kurdish and Turkish authors of the 16th-19th centuries spoke freely of Yezidi and Kizilbash *Kurds*. The Ottoman administration, incidentally, treated both communities as Muslims for tax and other legal purposes — which however did not prevent persecutions from time to time. A social boundary separating the various religious communities has always existed, but the importance attributed to it has changed considerably from period to period. In the past two decades it has increased to the extent that parts of the Yezidi and Alevi communities have declared themselves distinct nationalities, different from the (Sunni) Kurds.³⁸

It has repeatedly been observed that the first great Kurdish rebellion in Turkey, led by Shaykh Sa`id in 1925, was an uprising of Zaza-speaking Sunni Muslim tribes and was actively opposed by some of the neighbouring Zaza-speaking Alevi tribes, and that the 1937 rebellion in Dersim involved only Alevi and was not supported by any Sunni Kurds. The Kurdish national character of both rebellions has been questioned, both by scholars and by politicians of various persuasions. Were these not a Sunni Muslim and an Alevi uprising rather Kurdish ethnonational rebellions?³⁹ In both cases we find in the leadership at least a few urban educated persons who were motivated by Kurdish nationalist ideals, but their attempts to transcend community boundaries in mobilisation failed. For most participants, the rebellions may not have been much different from earlier instances of resistance against central government interference in local affairs. The defense of Islam was another powerful motivating factor in the Shaykh Sa`id rebellion. The Dersim rebellion, on the other hand, may have used Alevi symbols but it never was an uprising in the name of Alevism. It so happened that it was an uprising of Alevi and it therefore appealed little to solidarity on the part of Sunni Kurds.

The attitudes of the Kurdish- and Zaza-speaking Alevi towards Kurdish identity, which in the view of many was associated with Sunni Islam, remained ambivalent during the following decades. The Alevi had good reason to be secularists, and many Kurdish Alevi intellectuals became supporters of Kemalism because they saw Muslim fundamentalism as

³⁸ Martin van Bruinessen, "Nationalisme kurde et ethnicités intra-kurdes", *Peuples Méditerranéens* no. 68-69 (1994), 11-37; idem, "'Aslımı inkar eden haramzadedir!': the debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevi", in: K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele and A. Otter-Beaujean (eds), *Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 1-23.

³⁹ The Kemalist military and bureaucratic elite has considered the Shaykh Sa`id rebellion as an expression of Kurdish separatism but has in public statements emphasised that it was primarily Islamic. Later Kurdish nationalists understandably stressed the Kurdish nationalist nature of both revolts, while often criticising them as "feudal" and "reactionary". Zaza nationalists, who in the 1980s claimed that the Zaza speakers were a distinct nation, redefined them as Zaza instead of Kurdish national movements.

the greater threat to their community. In the 1960s and 1970s, young Alevi, Kurdish as well as Turkish, tended to prefer left-wing over ethnic politics — but in most of the Kurdish organisations that emerged then, one also finds Alevi among the most prominent leaders.

After the Shaykh Sa`id rebellion, Kurdish nationalism lost its overt association with Islam until well into the 1980s. Although on the whole nationalist sentiment was stronger among the Sunni Kurds than among Alevi, Ahl-i Haqq, Yezidis and Shi`is, and although the majority of the Sunni Kurds were personally pious Muslims, all the Kurdish cultural associations and political parties that emerged were resolutely secular. Kurds who were active as committed Muslims, on the other hand, de-emphasised their Kurdish ethnic identity and were often in conflict with the Kurdish movement, which was, especially from the 1950s on, strongly influenced by Marxism. It was only with the demise of Marxism as a political force that Islam has returned to Kurdish politics as a significant factor — and Kurdish identity politics to Islamism.

The Iranian revolution no doubt played an important part in this process, although its impact was not direct. In the first months of the revolution, Iran's Kurds were unorganised and a number of religious personalities emerged as their spokesmen, notably Mulla `Izzaddin Husayni in Mahabad and the Azhar-trained scholar Ahmad Muftizade in Sanandaj. Soon, however, control of events and leadership of the population passed from these religious figures to secular Kurdish politicians who had recently returned from prison or from exile and who succeeded in reorganising the dormant (secular and left-leaning) Kurdish parties. Husayni, incidentally, had at an early stage allied himself with the radical left and adopted a populist, Islamic socialist discourse, with a strong emphasis on self-determination for Iran's various ethno-linguistic groups. When the new central government sent its army and Shi`i irregulars to take control of Kurdistan there were short-lived Sunni Kurdish resistance movements led by a brother of Husayni in Bane and by the Naqshbandi shaykh Osman in the Hawraman region, but when the guerrilla war began in earnest only the secular forces remained in place.⁴⁰

During the Iran-Iraq war, Iran gave some support to the secular Iraqi Kurdish parties (the KDP first, later the PUK too) but it made efforts to stimulate the emergence of an Islamic movement among the Iraqi Kurds. Saudi Arabia, which felt threatened by Iran's revolutionary Muslims, made similar efforts, if only to preempt Iranian gains. The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (*Bizûtnewey Îslamî Kurdistan*), led by Mulla Osman bin Abdulaziz of Halabja, first emerged around 1987 and only became a significant political factor in the early 1990s. It appeared to balance its Iranian and Saudi connections, although Mulla Osman himself, who had previous connections with Egypt's Muslim Brothers, clearly tilted towards the Saudis. Iran also supported the Naqshbandi shaykh Muhammad Khalid Barzani, Mas`ud

⁴⁰ Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdischer Nationalismus und Sunni-Schi`i Konflikt", in: Kurt Greussig (ed.), *Geschichte und Politik religiöser Bewegungen im Iran* (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1981), pp. 372-409; idem, "The Kurds between Iran and Iraq", *MERIP Middle East Report* no. 141 (July-August 1986), 14-27.

Barzani's cousin, in establishing an armed force that was dubbed *Hizbullah al-Kurdi*, and that in the mid-1980s expelled Iraqi Communist Party and Kurdistan Socialist Party guerrilla units from the Badinan region. In the 1990s a "Revolutionary Hizbullah" (*Hizbullahê şorişger*), led by Edhem Barzani and also supported by Iran, appears to have split from the latter movement. So far, only the Islamic Movement appears to have found a stable basis of popular support and to have become a serious rival of the secular parties.

In Turkish Kurdistan an underground Hizbullah organisation, with Iranian connections, emerged sometime in the early 1980s. One wing of the movement was fiercely opposed to secular nationalism and became in the 1990s involved in an extremely violent feud with the PKK, in the course of which it co-operated closely with Turkish counter-insurgency organisations. Another Hizbullah wing, however, developed a form of Islamism that accommodated Kurdish nationalism.⁴¹

The PKK, conversely, adopted a more respectful attitude towards Islam. It had initially, like all left-wing movements in Turkey, been not only secularist but distinctly anti-religious. Having discovered how strongly attached to Islam many Kurdish villagers are, it renounced its earlier irreligiosity and founded two Muslim affiliates, the Union of Religious Persons and the Union of Patriotic Imams. (In order not to alienate Alevi and Yezidi Kurds because of this overture to Sunni Islam, the PKK not much later also founded an Alevi and a Yezidi association.)

Of the various religious movements in Turkish Kurdistan, it is probably the Nurcu movement that has the largest number of followers. The Nurcu movement probably is the most important one in all of Turkey, but a number of splits have recently occurred in it, as a result of which ethnicity has returned to the heart of the movement. The mainstream of the movement (associated with the newspaper *Yeni Asya*) has always stayed aloof from practical politics and, because of its view that Islam overcomes ethnic and national cleavages, played down the Kurdish side of the movement's founder. Another large wing of the Nurcu movement, led by Fethullah Gülen and associated with the newspaper *Zaman*, has sought an accommodation with Turkey's secularist military and bureaucratic elite and adopted a clear Turkish nationalist position. In reaction, several Kurdish Nurcu groups have begun emphasising their own Kurdish identities and have unearthed the Kurdish side of Sa'id-i Nursi's biography that had so long remained covered up. The most radical of these groups is nicknamed Med-Zehra (after the university Medresetü'z-Zehra that Said Nursi had wished to establish in Kurdistan, and with a hint at the Kurds' putative ancestors, the Medes). Its journal *Dava* is explicit in its embracing of Kurdish nationalism; it has adopted the leader of the first large Kurdish uprising in Turkey, Shaykh Sa'id, as the second great predecessor beside Sa'id-i Nursi, and has sympathetic reports on the Islamic Movement of (Iraqi) Kurdistan. Less politicised and more intellectual in content, the journal *Nûbihar* is an

⁴¹ The Hizbullah story is complicated, and it is so far only known fragmentarily. A good compilation of information from a wide range of Turkish media is given in: Faik Bulut, *İslamci örgütler-2*, 3rd revised edition (Istanbul: Doruk, 1997), pp. 327-331.

important pillar of the Kurdish cultural revival. Its contributors are close to the Nurcu movement but they are also Kurdish intellectuals. The journal engages much in dialogue with other groups, seeking its partners not primarily among other Muslim groups but among secular Kurdish groups.

The emergence of these Kurdish groups within the Nurcu movement, with their claim that concern with the Kurdish people was as much a part of Said Nursi's thought and action as the protection and revivification of Islam, appears to be a symptom of a more general trend. The dominant view in the Islamic movement used to be that ethnicity is irrelevant (and for this reason all forms of ethnic discrimination but also ethnic nationalism were to be rejected). Since the 1980s, however, ethnic and national identities have imposed themselves on the Islamic movement, at least in Turkey. On the one hand right-wing Turkish nationalism has attempted to co-opt Islamism in the form of the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis", which almost became the new state ideology. Persons of pan-Turk background became prominent members of the Islamist Refah party, and the influential wing of the Nurcu movement led by Fethullah Gülen not only adopted a distinctly Turkish nationalist discourse but also expanded its activities to Turkic Central Asia. This could, on the other hand, only force Kurdish Islamists to reclaim their own, distinct identity within the Islamic movement. Kurdish society and Kurdish politics have become more Islamic, both in the sense that religio-political organisations have become more prominent and that even the secular political movements have had to acknowledge and show respect to Islam. On the other hand, Islamic movements in Kurdistan have become more explicitly Kurdish than in the past.