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Review
Islam and politics in Iranian Kurdistan at a time of revolution: the life of Ahmad Moftizadeh

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Ali Ezzatyar, **The Last Mufti of Iranian Kurdistan: Ethnic and Religious Implications in the Greater Middle East.** New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xv + 246 pp., (ISBN 978-1-137-56525-9 hardback).

For a brief period in 1979, when the Kurds had begun confronting Iran's new Islamic revolutionary regime and were voicing demands for autonomy and cultural rights, Ahmad Moftizadeh was one of the most powerful men in Iranian Kurdistan. He was the only Kurdish leader who shared the new regime's conviction that a just social and political order could be established on the basis of Islamic principles. The other Kurdish movements were firmly secular, even though many of their supporters were personally pious Muslims. In Mahabad, the secular Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) had taken control of the city and military garrison and enjoyed broad popular support. In Sanandaj, Moftizadeh's city, the radical left Komala had made an unsuccessful attempt to take over the military base, resulting in some of the earliest clashes with the regime. The urban middle classes threw their weight behind Moftizadeh, who belonged to a highly respected family of religious notables and who claimed that accommodation with the Islamic Republic rather than confrontation would enable him to deliver autonomy for Kurdistan. But the increasingly violent confrontations of that year marginalised Moftizadeh and strengthened the position of Komala in the city. Before the year was over, Moftizadeh saw himself forced to leave Sanandaj and settle in the Shi'i Kurdish city of Kermanshah, but he refused to join the government-organised "Muslim peshmerga" fighting the secular nationalist Kurds. Establishing a common platform with other Sunni communities (mainly Baluch but also Turcoman), he continued demanding equal rights for Iran's Sunnis, causing his relations with the regime to deteriorate rapidly. In 1982 he was arrested, and he was held in jail without trial for the next ten years. In 1993, not long after his release, he died of ailments resulting from severe torture.

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I met and interviewed Moftizadeh in the spring of 1979, but at that time I did not appreciate the man's intellectual qualities (see van Bruinessen 1981). He had been pointed out to me by leftist friends as a religious conservative, a graduate of al-Azhar, a Muslim Brother (all of which proved to be wrong) and as one of the few who had dared to speak out under the Shah's regime (which to some extent was true). Moftizadeh told me, with obvious pride in the Kurdish tradition of Islamic learning, that he had received his religious education in Iraqi Kurdistan and at Tehran University and had not needed al-Azhar. He argued that Islamic concepts such as *shura* (consultation) provided more solid foundations for democracy and autonomy than Marxism offered, was confident he could persuade the Islamic leaders in Tehran to grant the Kurds a high degree of autonomy based on Islamic principles, and rejected any form of accommodation with his local "communist" rivals. After his disappearance from the scene, he was derided by those rivals and silenced by the regime. Soon he was almost forgotten outside Islamic circles, except for the occasional footnote in the sparse literature on Iranian Kurdistan since the Islamic revolution.

He had a tightly knit group of devoted followers, however, who in spite of several waves of repression kept Moftizadeh's thought and the movement he founded, Maktab Qur'an (Qur'anic school of thought), alive, and he remains a respected figure among other Kurdish as well as Baluch Muslim groups. Both the Maktab Qur'an and the inter-ethnic Sunni platform Shams (Shura-ye Markaz-e Ahl-e Sonnat, or Sunni Central Council) have received occasional mention in the literature, but have not been the subject of full-fledged study except for two recent short articles by Mofidi (2015) and Kosravi et al. (2016).[1]

Ali Ezzatyar's book is the first attempt at a comprehensive biography of Ahmad Moftizadeh and study of his religious and political ideas, placing them in the context of the political developments in Iran and Kurdistan in the second half of the twentieth century. The author, who appears to be of Iranian Kurdish origin but grew up in the West and is currently based in Pakistan, tells little about himself and his relationship with his subject. He was a student in the US in the 1990s; his parents "shielded [him] from the conflict of their youth", and he presumably developed an interest in Moftizadeh and the situation of the Iranian Kurds in general during the years of Khatami's presidency (1997-2005), when he spent some time in Iran as an intern in a private consultancy firm in Tehran. The first chapter, which sketches the historical context of the rise of Islamism and nationalism in Kurdistan, is mainly based on the existing literature in English. The remainder of the book is entirely original; it is largely based on extensive conversations in Persian or Kurdish with relatives and former associates of Moftizadeh, telephone interviews with some other key informants, and a perusal of Moftizadeh's letters from prison, which are preserved by the

[1] The unpublished habilitation thesis by Dudoignon (2014) contains interesting information on Shams and brings out the lasting respect enjoyed by Moftizadeh among the Baluch.

Maktab Qur'an group. The author presents a sympathetic but not uncritical portrait of Moftizadeh as a Muslim intellectual and dilettante politician. His emphasis on Islam and Muslim concerns in the social history of Kurdistan constitutes a valuable corrective to the dominant narratives in which Islam occurs mainly as an inhibiting factor in the social and political struggles.

Moftizadeh was born into a highly respected family of religious notables; Ezzatyar emphasises the importance of this family background for his rise to a position of influence, as well as Moftizadeh's break with tradition in rejecting of the formal position to which his birth entitled him. The observations in this book on the important social role of families of landed and religious notables provide insight in an understudied aspect of the social history of the region. These notable families owed their origins to the charismatic authority of a religious leader, typically a Sufi sheikh, or to the delegation of political authority and land rights from state officials to tribal chieftains. Most of the religious notables were affiliated with the Naqshbandi or Qadiri Sufi orders and owed their prestige to their spiritual guidance and popular belief in their supernatural powers rather than their scholarly learning. Members of such notable families, both of the tribal-feudal and the religious type, have played prominent roles in the national movement as well as in the efforts to integrate Kurdish society into the Iranian nation state.

Ahmad Moftizadeh's family were notables of a somewhat different kind. They had tribal landed origins but acquired a reputation for religious learning, recognised by the state, which became the major factor in the family's prestige. Another well-known example of such a family is that of Ghazi Mohammad, the President of the 1946 Kurdish Republic, whose ancestors had for several generations been the state-approved Islamic judges or *ghazi* (*qadi*) in Mahabad (Ghazi Mohammad himself was the last of this line of madrasa-trained authorities). The Mofti family of Sanandaj was allegedly the only family in Iranian Kurdistan officially recognised as *mufti* (i.e. a person authorised to answer questions of Islamic law in the form of a *fatwa*). The Ottoman Empire appointed *mufti*s to every province and district, and in some places the office became hereditary in certain families, but in Shi'i Iran there was no such specialised office and the issuance of *fatwa*s was the privilege of the higher echelons of the clerical hierarchy of *hojjatoleslam*s and *ayatollah*s. Ahmad's grandfather Abdollah was the exception; according to the family tradition as summarised by Ezzatyar, the Qajar ruler Nasireddin Shah summoned Molla Abdollah to his court to present the Sunni view on a religious controversy about which the Shi`i scholars were divided. His intervention so impressed his Shi'i colleagues and the shah that the latter named him *mufti* for Iran's Sunnis, apparently intending this to be the Sunni equivalent to the Shi'i *ayatollah*. There is no written record of this appointment, which must have taken place around 1895, but Ezzatyar reproduces a *ferman* of 1907 by which Molla Abdollah Mofti was appointed to lead the largest mosque of Sanandaj, Dar al-Ehsan. Through the remaining Qajar period and under the Pahlavi dynasty, Molla Abdollah

Mofti and his descendants were officially recognised as *mufti* and led the Dar al-Ehsan.

Another notable family that plays a role in this book is the landowning Ilkhanizadeh family of Bukan (whose name indicates that they were once state-recognised tribal lords), presently better known by the name of Mohtadi. Abdul Rahman Ilkhanizadeh was a minister in the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad; in the 1950s we find him, having changed the family name to Mohtadi, teaching (Sunni) theology at the University of Tehran. There were in those days two Sunni theologians teaching at the university, both of them Kurds; the other was Molla Mahmud Mofti, Abdollah Mofti's eldest son and Ahmad's father. The two men were close, and when Ahmad Moftizadeh followed his father to Tehran in 1958, he also developed close relations with the Mohtadi family and ended up marrying Abdul Rahman's daughter Khadijah, thereby further cementing the ties between both families. Abdul Rahman's sons Salah and Abdollah Mohtadi, who had grown up in Tehran, gradually turned away from religion to Marxism. They were to become leaders of the radical left Kurdish movement Komala, which in 1979 clashed with Moftizadeh.

Ahmad was an outspoken nationalist in the years he lived in Tehran (1958-65) and allegedly active in the underground KDP-I (some of Ezzatyar's sources claim he was in fact leading the party's Tehran branch). Unlike the Mohtadi brothers, he was never attracted to the left but developed a strong interest in the social teachings of Islam. He was following lectures at the university but soon also assisted his father's teaching and replaced him when he was ill. Together with other Kurdish activists he was arrested in 1964 and remained a political prisoner for several months. In prison he befriended some of the Shi'i activists who had been jailed after the 1963 protests and who were later to play leading roles in the Islamic revolution. His confidence that he could persuade Tehran to grant the Kurds autonomy within the Islamic Republic was based on his friendship with the leading revolutionaries Ayatollah Beheshti and Javad Bahonar dating from their prison days, and his conviction that they shared the same political vision of equal rights in a revolutionary Islamic polity.

Ahmad Moftizadeh declined to succeed his father as the *mufti* when the latter passed away in 1963, leaving the position to his uncle Khaled. In 1965 he returned to Sanandaj and settled to a simple life as an occasional religious teacher; from 1975 onwards he delivered religious talks on local radio that were quite popular. With the help of a few associates he established a religious school in Mariwan that was to give his religious movement its name, Maktab Qur'an. Moftizadeh was not a religious scholar in the classical mould such as his father and uncle had been, but a Muslim thinker concerned with the relevance of Islamic values to contemporary social problems. His religious social thought resembled, as Ezzatyar observes and as becomes even clearer from his summary of Moftizadeh's prison letters, that of Iran's more famous Shi'i intellectuals Mehdi Bazargan and Ali Shariati. It is no coincidence that Moftizadeh, after the regime's first military assault on Kurdistan and after frustrating meetings with

Khomeini and other leaders who rejected the very idea of Kurdish autonomy and other national rights, chose the Shi'i cultural centre where Shariati and Bazargan had delivered their most famous lectures as the place for the first time to openly criticise Khomeini and equate his doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* with the shah's one-man rule. (Ezzatyar reproduces sections of this crucial speech.)

Ezzatyar's interlocutors insist that Moftizadeh did not model himself on any one specific Muslim thinker but borrowed eclectically from a wide range of "wise men," which included, besides the Iranian Muslim scholars and intellectuals he knew in Tehran, his early teachers in Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan and, presumably, Arab thinkers he had read. This raises questions about the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on Moftizadeh and the Maktab Qur'an. Ezzatyar mentions claims that Moftizadeh was in fact affiliated with, or co-operated closely with the Brotherhood but he refutes those claims, and the analysis of Moftizadeh's prison writings brings out clearly how independent a thinker he was. He may, however, have encountered Muslim Brotherhood activists early in life; his biography shows up at least a few possible meeting points. As Ezzatyar notices, the Dar al-Ehsan mosque in Sanandaj often had scholars from Egypt's al-Azhar (where the Brotherhood once had a strong following) visiting for a period of teaching and preaching. Moreover, the two places in Iraq where Moftizadeh had studied, Halabja and Baghdad, were precisely those where the Iraqi branch of the Brotherhood had the strongest presence (see al-`Azami, 2002; Leezenberg, 2006).

The Muslim Brotherhood certainly was aware of Moftizadeh as the most prominent Sunni Muslim spokesman in post-revolutionary Iran. The Brotherhood was broadly supportive of the Iranian revolution, in spite of Sunni-Shi'i differences, and in 1980, when Moftizadeh was in hiding in Kermanshah and felt besieged by both leftist guerrillas and Shi'i revolutionary guards, the Brotherhood made in fact an attempt to achieve reconciliation between him and the Iranian authorities. This episode is narrated in the memoirs of the intermediary, Youssef Nada, which contain interesting information to complement Ezzatyar's book (Nada and Thompson, 2012).

Nada, a well-connected Egyptian businessman who often acted on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood on confidential missions abroad, offered his services to Iran's president Abolhasan Bani-Sadr as a go-between. Nada had gained much goodwill with the new regime by arranging for a large shipment of steel and grain to bypass the American-imposed trade embargo. He moreover knew Bani-Sadr personally from the latter's days in Paris, and he also knew Bani-Sadr's adviser for Kurdish affairs, Mozaffar Partowmeh, an American-trained scientist who was himself a Kurd and a Muslim Brother. Both agreed to his attempt at mediation. Nada visited Moftizadeh in his hideout and pleaded with both sides to seek accommodation on behalf of Sunnis and Shi'is' shared interests as Muslims. The mission failed, and after the onset of the Iraq-Iran war the Brotherhood lost whatever leverage it had in Tehran. Nada's account clearly shows Moftizadeh's anger at the communists and secular

nationalists who had expelled him from Sanandaj as well as his intense sense of betrayal by the regime.[2]

Only just a year earlier, Moftizadeh had emerged victorious from a failed attempt by Bani-Sadr to intervene in the power struggle in Sanandaj (described in detail by Ezzatyar). After the first armed clashes between Kurdish revolutionaries and Iranian military in the spring of 1979, a high-powered mission from Tehran that included Bani-Sadr as well as the ayatollahs Beheshti and Taleghani visited Sanandaj. Bani-Sadr proposed the establishment of a five-person governing city council, consisting of his personal appointee Partowmeh along with two Moftizadeh followers and two leftists, in the apparent expectation that the latter two mutually hostile groups would neutralise each other. Lacking any local support, however, Partowmeh failed to make much of an impact, and elections held later that year resulted in a city council heavily dominated by Moftizadeh's faction.

Moftizadeh's religious and political ideas may in the 1970s have had some similarity with those of the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance in the emphasis on *shura* (consultation) as the Islamic form of democracy, but his ideas underwent major changes in response to the political situation. His religious thought appears to have reached its fullest development in the years of imprisonment under the Islamic Republic, inspired by the experience of the Islamic revolution and disaffection with its course. Ezzatyar's chapter dealing with Moftizadeh's prison letters to relatives and followers is in my view the most interesting part of this book. He appears to have arrived independently to similar positions as Shi'i post-Islamist thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush, though much earlier. Major themes in these letters that Ezzatyar identifies include his view of the Qur'an as a living text, which does not have a single fixed meaning for all time but needs to be interpreted in accordance with changing circumstances; the *shura* system of governance; the need for separation of religion and politics; non-violence in Islam; the empowerment of women; and tolerance of divergent views. The letters place Islamic spirituality above the detailed study of religious obligations (*fiqh*), enjoin respect for other religions and reject all forms of compulsion in religion. Women should take equal part in political decision-making, and should have the same right of divorce as men. In Kurdish traditional dances, they can dance together with men. Whereas in his 1980 meeting with Youssef Nada, Moftizadeh appeared to be full of rancour towards his leftist rivals, the prison letters show a man who declines judging others and does not even have a harsh word for his torturers.

The Maktab Qur'an movement has, in spite of several waves of massive arrests of its members, survived as a distinct Kurdish Islamic group, held together by a cult-like veneration for Moftizadeh and a quietist vision of Islamic

[2] Nada returned to Tehran for a short visit in 1993. Hearing that Moftizadeh had recently been released from prison, he managed to find him through local Muslim Brotherhood contacts. He was shocked to see how Moftizadeh had been physically destroyed by incessant torture, and reports from hearsay on the persecution and killing of Moftizadeh's followers.

spirituality. Some of his closest former companions however have distanced themselves from the group and in retrospect attribute Moftizadeh's failure to major contradictions they perceive in his project of a progressive Islamism that would incorporate Kurdish national demands. Ezzatyar quotes one close collaborator:

> "Moftizadeh's biggest shortcoming was his deep desire for Islam to be liberal and democratic, and a unifier (…) He would try to twist and turn Islamic doctrine to make it that way but (…) these two ideals were not compatible the way he wanted them to be… He would try as hard as he could to argue away the bitter portions of the Qur'an [such as the amputation of limbs as punishment for theft]. The four corners of today's Islam were too restrictive for Moftizadeh (…) He was too big to be placed in the frame of Islam. But he would try to fit himself in that frame, and try to stretch the frame out, but in the end it was too rigid" (pp. 187-188).

Ezzatyar notes that Moftizadeh remains to this day a polarising figure in Kurdistan, considered as a traitor by some for his initial endorsement of the Islamic Republic and as a naïve but well-intentioned dilettante politician by others. He suggests Moftizadeh's failure meant the defeat of political Islam as a credible alternative in Iranian Kurdistan, but he also notes that Moftizadeh remains an icon not only for the non-political Maktab Qur'an but also for more overtly political Islamists in Iran and Iraq. To these observations we may add that among Muslim activists in Turkish Kurdistan too, Moftizadeh has posthumously gained a certain reputation due to the memoirs of Yakup Aslan (2014), an Islamist activist who fled Turkey after the 1980 coup. Aslan spent time with Iranian revolutionary groups and Afghan *mujahidin* but was soon disillusioned by both and finally found a more congenial environment with the Maktab Qur'an group.

Ezzatyar's book is a welcome contribution to the literature on the place of religion in Kurdish society and developments in Iranian Kurdistan under the Pahlavis and the Islamic Republic. It shows convincingly that Ahmad Moftizadeh deserves to be remembered as one of the most significant and original Kurdish Muslim thinkers of the past century.

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