

Salafism, Sectarianism, and National Identity in Iraqi Kurdistan

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This article examines the history of Salafism within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq using interviews, archives, social media, and an online survey. Despite Salafism and nationalism generally being seen as rival political ideologies, Kurdish Salafis have over the last decade increasingly linked their sectarian struggle to the Kurdish ethno-nationalist cause. Such efforts provide new understandings both of Salafism and of Kurdish nationalism while also potentially destabilizing the alliance between Kurdish nationalist and Shi'i sectarian parties that has governed Iraq since 2003.

Religion and nationalism in the Muslim world have a long and complex history of antagonism and complementarity. Many Islamic thinkers have idealized the early caliphate as a community bound by faith transcending tribal, ethnic, or national distinctions while regarding nationalism as an affront to pan-Islamic unity. Nonetheless, many modern nationalist movements have integrated Islam, alongside language and ethnicity, as an element in their national communities. The “logic is pan-Islamic, but its reality is often particular,” noted political scientist Sami Zubaida.¹ Salafism seems to reject such syntheses, insisting on ridding Islam of heretical accretions and modern innovations. Islam, in this view, transcends the nation-state’s territorial and ethnic boundaries. But even as Salafi ideologues propound transnationalism, Salafi actors maneuver within a terrain where nation-states remain the predominant mode of political organization.² Salafis’ engagement with nationalism, therefore, often involves pragmatic accommodation.

This article uses the case of the Salafi movement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) to further explore the connections between Salafism and nationalism. As a for-

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1. Sami Zubaida, “Islam and Nationalism: Continuities and Contradictions,” *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 4 (Oct. 2004): 409, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2004.00174.x>. See also Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

2. Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 100; Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

mal political entity, the KRI emerged after Iraq's defeat in the first Gulf War in 1991. Lacking international recognition of its sovereignty or formal status under Iraqi law, it operated as a de facto state. Iraq's 2005 constitution recognized the KRI as an autonomous region within Iraq. The two dominant parties within the KRI, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), pushed to maximize the region's autonomy. At times they considered outright secession.³ The anomalous political status of Iraqi Kurdistan as an unrecognized state makes it a useful case to understand how Salafism grapples with nationalism.

This article aims to contribute to both the study of Salafism and the study of Kurdistan's political development. Studies of Salafi politics generally ignore the case of Salafi Kurds. For example, terrorism and jihadism researcher Thomas Hegghammer lumped Kurdish militants in Afghanistan with "Afghan Arab" fighters in his study of the origins of the Salafi jihadist movement in Afghanistan.⁴ Reciprocally, Salafis are largely absent from studies of politics in the KRI, where issues of ethnicity and nationalism overshadow those of religion.⁵ Most studies focus on the KDP and PUK, depicting them as modernizing ethno-nationalist factions.⁶ Kurdish Islamists are minor players in these accounts; and Salafis, a terrorist fringe.⁷ This article shows that Iraqi Kurdish Salafis, similar to other Salafis, mobilize networks on the ground and through burgeoning media domains. They espouse a range of political programs, from quietism to radicalism. But with Kurdish nationalism as the primary focal point of identification in the region, Salafis have found ways to reconcile their sectarian creed with ethno-nationalism.

Salafism does not command a mass following within Iraqi Kurdistan, but its growth in recent years has significant implications for Iraq and the Middle East as a whole. Kurdish jihadis are unlikely to pose a significant military risk to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and Salafi groups have been unable to gain significant electoral traction. Yet the Salafi turn, especially in its quietist form, represents a significant societal transformation. Moreover, this transformation has helped catalyze a pro-

3. Yaniv Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010); Gareth R. V. Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

4. Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 515. See also Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst, 2009).

5. Robert Olson, "Five Stages of Kurdish Nationalism: 1880–1980," *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs Journal* 12, no. 2 (1991): 391–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666959108716214>. Ofra Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

6. Aram Rafaat, *Kurdistan in Iraq: The Evolution of a Quasi-State* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed, 1992).

7. Michael Rubin, "The Islamist Threat from Iraqi Kurdistan," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 3, no. 12 (Dec. 2001), www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0112_ir1.htm; Michel Leezenberg, "Political Islam among the Kurds" (conference paper, Jagiellonian University/Polish-Kurdish Society, Kraków, Mar. 2001); Mohammad Salih Mustafa, "Religious Nationalism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," (PhD diss., University of Exeter, Aug. 2017).

cess scholars call *sectarianization*,⁸ wherein national and parochial intra-Kurdish conflicts are increasingly interpreted through sectarian geopolitical narratives and criteria.⁹ Within the larger Iraqi context, emphasizing Sunni Islam as a component of Kurdish national identity has the potential to undermine the bargain struck between Kurdish nationalist and Shi‘i sectarian parties in 2003. It raises possibilities of burgeoning linkages between Iraqi Sunnis — Arabs, Kurds, and others — in opposition to the Shi‘i-dominated central government. This development could destabilize Iraq domestically and complicate the KRG’s engagements with neighboring states.

REAPPRAISING SALAFISM AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Muslim thinkers have long debated the propriety of a system of sovereign statehood grounded in nationalism and ethnic particularism. Tradition holds that the early caliphates were bound by faith alone, not tribal or ethnic origin. The modern state system, organized around ethno-nationalist distinction, arose not from divine inspiration but the design of European Christians. Despite these misgivings, however, Islamic modernist reformers have accommodated nationalism. Indeed, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood embrace self-determination, nationalism, and statehood to counter Western incursion.¹⁰

Contemporary Salafism offers a different approach. The Salafi movement, although hardly monolithic, is defined by certain core beliefs. Salafis stress the principle of divine unity (*tawhid*), literalist understandings of scripture, and rigorous emulation of the customs of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunni Islam is regarded as the sole legitimate sect, while Shi‘ism, Sufism, and even some classical Sunni doctrinal schools are regarded as deviant, schismatic, and anathema.¹¹ A wide range of practices and attitudes derive from these seeming tenets.¹² In the early and mid-twentieth century, Salafi ideologues supported a kind of anti-imperialist universal Islamic nationalism. They refused, however, to yoke Islam to nationalism for the sake of territorially delimited nation-states and retained pan-Islamic unification as their ultimate objective. Nationalism detracted from the agenda of global Islamic unity and distracted from personal, societal, or political purification. This skepticism was further borne out by the hum-

8. Morten Valbjørn, “What’s So Sectarian about Sectarian Politics? Identity Politics and Authoritarianism in a New Middle East,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (Apr. 2019): 127–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12289>; Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, “Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East,” *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 15, no. 3 (2017): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354462>.

9. Simon Mabon, *Houses Built on Sand: Violence, Sectarianism and Revolution in the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 188.

10. Marc Lynch, “Islam Divided Between *Salafi-Jihad* and the *Ikhwan*,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 6 (2010): 467–87. See also Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

11. For an expansive definition of Salafism, see Laurent Bonnefoy, “Salafiyya,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, vol. 2, second ed., edited by Richard C. Martin (Detroit: Gale, 2016), 1008–10; P. Shinar, and W. Ende, “Salafiyya” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second ed., edited by P. Bearman et al. (online, 2012). https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0982.

12. Peter Mandaville, “Transnational Muslim Solidarities and Everyday Life,” *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 1 (Jan. 2011): 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2010.00459.x>.

bling of secular Arab nationalist regimes in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.¹³ Since then, Salafism has permeated global Islamic discourse through pulpits, satellite broadcasts, and increasingly, social media.¹⁴

There are many ways to categorize Salafi ideology and political practice.¹⁵ What many scholars call Salafi quietism focuses on cultivating inner sanctity and ritual purity while treating the state as a necessary evil. Political obedience is needed to allow the process of societal and personal purification. For quietists, rule by Muslim-led nationalist regimes was acceptable so long as they afforded room to continue Salafis' proselytizing mission. In contrast, radical Salafi jihadists, like al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State organization, regard Muslim rulers as apostates for failing to implement shari'a fully. To jihadists, nationalism is an abomination.¹⁶ As political scientist Daniel Byman put it, "Salafi-jihadists oppose nationalism, rejecting the boundaries that divide Muslims as drawn by colonial powers and recognized by the community of nations. They call on Muslims to fight as Muslims, not as Egyptians, Iraqis, or other national communities."¹⁷ Jihadists' goal, then, is a revolution that will unify the entire Islamic community (*umma*).¹⁸

Conflicting attitudes toward nationalism have created tensions within the Salafi camp and between Salafis and other political actors. These tensions become especially apparent amid campaigns for national liberation and secession. Salafi hostility toward nationalist movements is perhaps natural when nationalist leaders are themselves secularists. As political scientists Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukars noted, "Salafism historically has not been able to graft itself onto ethnonationalist struggles."¹⁹ In the

13. Itzhak Weismann, "A Perverted Balance: Modern Salafism between Reform and Jihad," *Die Welt des Islams* 57, no. 1 (2017): 33–66. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700607-00571p04>. See also Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism*.

14. Kayla Branson, "Islamist Cyber-Activism: Contesting the Message, Redefining the Public," *Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 5 (2014): 713–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2014.976513>; Geneive Abdo, "Salafists and Sectarianism: Twitter and Communal Conflict in the Middle East," Brookings Institution, Center for Middle East Policy report, March 26, 2015, www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Abdo-Paper_Final_Web.pdf; Alexandra Siegel, "Sectarian Twitter Wars: Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, brief (Dec. 2015), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Brief-Siegel-Sectarian_Twitter_Wars.pdf.

15. Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004>; Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Joas Wagemakers, "Salafism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (online: Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.255>.

16. Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Abdelghani Mimouni, "Debating *al-Hakimiyyah* and *Takfir* in Salafism: The Genesis of Intra-Salafi Schism in the 1990s" (PhD diss., Exeter University, May 2016).

17. Daniel Byman, "Fighting *Salafi-Jihadist* Insurgencies: How Much Does Religion Really Matter?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 5 (2013): 356, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X2013.775417>.

18. Assaf Moghadam, "The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 3 (Feb. 2008): 14–16; Barak Mendelsohn, *Jihadism Constrained: The Limits of Transnational Jihadism and What It Means for Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

19. Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukars, *Salafism in the Maghreb: Politics, Piety, and Militancy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 18. See also Emil Souleimanov, "A Perfect *Umma*? How Ethnicity Shapes the Organization and Operation of Dagestan's Jihadist Groups," *Ethnicities* 18, no. 3 (2018): 434–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796817700933>.

early 2000s, Salafi propagandists began infiltrating refugee camps in Lebanon controlled by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), de-emphasizing the struggle for Palestine (despite many being Palestinian themselves) in favor of jihadist campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. The result was friction between Salafis and local nationalist leaders and sporadic armed confrontations.²⁰ Salafis have also opposed nationalist movements that were explicitly grounded in Islamic ideology. Salafi cells in the Gaza Strip fought pitched battles with Hamas, which itself had begun as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood synthesizing Islamist ideology and Palestinian nationalism.²¹ Similarly, the Indonesian Salafi group Laskar Jihad clashed with the separatist Free Aceh Movement, which had conjoined Islamism and Acehnese nationalism.²² Even when Muslims live under Christian rule, as in the Oromo region of Ethiopia, Salafi groups have refused to cooperate with local secession movements.²³

Yet, on other occasions, belying the assumption of antipathy, Salafis have struck tactical alliances with ethno-nationalist movements. For example, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Salafis made common cause with nationalist fighters in the North Caucasus and Central Asia to fight continued Russian domination.²⁴ Similarly, after the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 brought instability to the Sahel, Ansar al-Din and the Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa established an operational alliance with the Tuareg separatist Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNL). Their joint forces overran northern Mali. The Salafis, many of whom were foreigners to the region who did not speak Tuareg, made gestures recognizing the MNL's declared Islamic State of Azawad. The nationalists, in turn, burnished their own Islamic credentials.²⁵ In both the cases, though, the relationship between Salafis and nationalists eventually soured and the alliance disintegrated.

20. Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon*, trans. Pascale Ghazaleh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Robert G. Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

21. Benedetta Berti, "Salafi-Jihadi Activism in Gaza: Mapping the Threat," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 5 (May 2010): 5–9; Khaled Hroub, "Salafi Formations in Palestine and the Limits of a De-Palestinised Milieu," *Holy Land Studies* 7, no. 2 (Dec. 2008): 157–81.

22. Edward Aspinall, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 194–99; Damien Kingsbury, "The Free Aceh Movement: Islam and Democratisation," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 37, no. 2 (2007): 166–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472330701253759>.

23. Terje Østebø, *Localising Salafism: Religious Change among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 195

24. Alexander Knysh, "Contextualizing the Salafi-Sufi Conflict (from the Northern Caucasus to Hadramawt)," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (July 2007): 503–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200701348847>; Domitilla Sagramoso, "The Radicalisation of Islamic Salafi *Jamaats* in the North Caucasus: Moving Closer to the Global Jihadist Movement?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 3 (2012): 561–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.661933>; Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri M. Zhukov, "Islamists and Nationalists: Rebel Motivation and Counterinsurgency in Russia's North Caucasus," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (May 2015): 222–38. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305541500012X>.

25. Micha'el Tanchum. "Al-Qa'ida's West African Advance: Nigeria's Boko Haram, Mali's Touareg, and the Spread of Salafi Jihadism," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2012): 75–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2012.11446504>; Lawrence E. Cline, "Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers: The Struggles for Northern Mali," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (2013): 617–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.802972>.

In southern Yemen, Salafism and nationalism have become even more closely intertwined. In the early 2000s some Salafi leaders in the south, including those associated with al-Qa‘ida in the Arabian Peninsula, allied with tribal forces in fighting against the government. This uprising intermingled with the Southern Movement (*al-Hirak al-Janubi*), a loose coalition demanding the renewed independence of South Yemen, which had merged with North Yemen in 1990.²⁶ There were always tensions within the movement between the old guard stalwarts of South Yemen’s formerly ruling Yemeni Socialist Party and the newly mobilized religious and tribal elements. The Salafis became more deeply involved in southern secession following the 2012 ouster of Yemeni president ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Salih. The Southern Transitional Council (STC), a leading secessionist faction, embodies the fusion between Salafism and nationalism. The STC chairman, ‘Aydarus al-Zubaydi, is a former South Yemeni army officer. His first deputy, Hani Bin Brek, is a Saudi-trained Salafi preacher who commands the powerful Security Belt militia around ‘Aden. The STC, with backing from the United Arab Emirates, initially worked with the internationally recognized Yemeni government under President ‘Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi to repel Ansar Allah, the Shi‘i movement commonly referred to as the Huthis. The relationship with the Hadi government deteriorated as the STC refused to disarm. STC leaders declared independence in 2016 in a massive show of force in ‘Aden. Pro-separatist Salafi clerics propounded on the south’s unique cultural and religious heritage; decried the government’s willingness to compromise with Yemen’s Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, al-Islah (in full, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, *al-Tajammu‘ al-Yamani li-l-Islah*); and expressed continued support for militias like the Security Belt forces that defied the Hadi government.²⁷

Salafi theology deems the allegiance to nationalism as heresy, but Salafi practices are more complicated. The case of Iraqi Kurdistan adds further variety to the forms of engagement between Salafism and nationalist movements. It emphasizes the flexible and even strategic ways in which Salafism relates to nationalism.

THE SALAFI TURN IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

At first glance, Iraqi Kurdistan seems like an unlikely place for Salafism to take root. Kurdish nationalism in Iraq has shown a marked tendency toward secularism over the last century. The KDP and PUK maintained long-standing, although not always amicable, alliances with the Iraqi Communist Party. The overwhelming majority of Iraq’s Kurds practice a brand of Islam grounded in the Sunni Shafi‘i legal school and inflected with Sufi traditions.²⁸ Only two percent of the KRI population identified themselves as Shi‘a, according to a 2014 poll.²⁹ Feylis, a Kurdish-speaking Shi‘i

26. Laurent Bonnefoy (ed.), *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity* (London: Hurst, 2011).

27. Susanne Dahlgren, “The Battle for South Yemen,” *Middle East Report* no. 292 (Fall/Winter 2019), <https://merip.org/2019/12/the-battle-for-south-yemen>; Ariel I. Ahram, *Break all the Borders: Separatism and the Reshaping of the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 116–19.

28. Martin van Bruinessen, *Mullas, Sufis, and Heretics: The Role of Religion in Kurdish Society* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011).

29. Besheer Mohamed, “Who Are the Iraqi Kurds?” Pew Research Center, August 20, 2014, <https://pewrsr.ch/1z000i6>.

community concentrated in Baghdad and Diyala, had once been well-represented among the Kurdish nationalist movement but were decimated during the rule of President Saddam Husayn (1979–2003), with most getting deported to Iran. A small number did return to Iraq after Saddam’s downfall but mostly to areas outside the KRI.³⁰ Small Kurdish-speaking heterodox groups like the Yezidis are also traditionally regarded as integral to the Kurdish nationalist community, even if members of the groups themselves prefer a separate status.³¹ The Iraqi state itself inadvertently encouraged secular and ethno-linguistic notions of Kurdish identity. Language was the basis of national identity in the ideology of the Arab Socialist Ba’th Party, which ruled Iraq from 1968 to 2003. Accordingly, articulations of Kurdish self-rule had to proceed from the premise of linguistic, not religious, distinction.³²

Two cataclysmic events shaped early Kurdish Salafism. The first was the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). The KDP and PUK allied with Iran and waged an insurgency in the north. By the mid-1980s northern Iraq was enveloped in a brutal cycle of guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency. Iraqi forces launched the Anfal campaign, genocidal operations that razed thousands of villages and killed an estimated 50,000–182,000 people. Government propaganda dispensed with the principles of secularism and tried to incite Iraqi Sunnis to wage war against Shi’i Iran. Named in reference to the Qur’anic sura about the triumph of Muhammad’s followers enjoying the spoils (*anfal*) of victory against a larger army of Arabian polytheists, this appeal primarily targeted Arab Sunnis but also sought to undermine the Kurdish-Iranian alliance. Indeed, the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood even appealed to the leaders of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) to remain loyal to Saddam for the sake of Sunni solidarity. Few were convinced. The IMK saw Saddam as an enemy of the Kurds and of Islam, framing its campaign against the Ba’thist regime as a jihad intended to prepare Kurdistan to become an Islamic republic.³³ In 1987 IMK leader ‘Usman ‘Abdul‘aziz publicly tore up a letter from the international Muslim Brotherhood urging him to desist in the military campaign, saying “I am a jihadist Muslim Kurd. I am a free man; they cannot give me orders.”³⁴

30. Saad B. Eskander, “Fayli Kurds of Baghdad and the Ba’ath Regime,” in *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*, ed. Faleh A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod (San Francisco: Saqi, 2006), 180–202.

31. Richard Foltz, “The ‘Original’ Kurdish Religion? Kurdish Nationalism and the False Conflation of the Yezidi and Zoroastrian Traditions,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 10, no. 1 (Jun. 2017): 87–106. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18747167-12341309>; Eszter Spät, “Yezidi Identity Politics and Political Ambitions in the Wake of the ISIS attack,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 5 (2018): 420–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1406689>.

32. Yaniv Voller, “Identity and the Ba’th Regime’s Campaign against Kurdish Rebels in Northern Iraq,” *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 383–401. <https://doi.org/10.3751/71.3.13>.

33. Mohammed Shareef, “Kurdish Islamists in Iraq from the Muslim Brotherhood to the So-Called Islamic State: Continuity or Departure?” King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, *Dirasat* no. 5 (June 2015): 20–22; Adel Bakawan, “Three Generations of Jihadism in Iraqi Kurdistan,” Institut français des relations internationales, *Notes de l’Ifri* (July 2017): 9.

34. Quoted in Bakawan, “Three Generations,” 10. For more on the turbulent relationship between the Ba’thist regime and the Muslim Brotherhood and Saddam’s effort to elicit support from the Brotherhood in Syria during the Iran-Iraq War, see Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968–2003: Ba’thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 190–206; Samuel Helfont, *Compulsion in Religion: Saddam Hussein, Islam, and the Roots of Insurgencies in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 87–99.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, nearly contemporaneous with the Iran-Iraq War, also affected Kurdish Islamist circles. Several IMK figures encouraged Kurds to join the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Najmaddin Faraj Ahmad, known as Mullah Krekar (b. 1956) and then a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and several other prominent Islamists like Walid Yunis and ‘Ali Wali, joined the campaign in Afghanistan. In the late 1980s Kurdish Islamists set up what was called the House of the Kurds (Arabic: *Bayt al-Akrad*) in Peshawar, Pakistan, to support Kurdish battalions in Afghanistan. Returning to Iraq, Mullah Krekar took a seat on the IMK’s consultation (*shura*) council and propounded on the imperative to build an Islamic caliphate, not a Kurdish ethno-state. Krekar also sought to excommunicate fellow Kurds as heretics for ingesting the “infidel” notion of national statehood.³⁵

The March 1991 uprising that ousted Ba‘thist forces from northern Iraq signaled new life for Kurdish nationalism. The KDP and PUK took control of the area, demarcating western and eastern zones of control, respectively. For the first time since a short-lived republic in the Iranian city of Mahabad in 1946, Kurdish nationalists held control over a functional state apparatus, including security organs, educational institutions, and media. The newly established Kurdistan Regional Government offered residents a new cultural space oriented to the renewed vision of Kurdish nationalism tied to a specific territory where Kurdish was the language of administration and media.³⁶

Yet, Kurdish Islamists floundered in this new environment. The official Muslim Brotherhood of Kurdistan splintered. Siddiq ‘Abdul‘aziz (brother of the aforementioned ‘Usman ‘Abdul‘aziz) established an independent political party in 1992 called the Kurdistan Islamic Revolutionary Movement (*Bizutinaway Raparini Islamiyi Kurdistan*). Salahaddin Bahaaddin established a third faction two years later, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU; sometimes *Yakgirtu*, Kurdish for “the Union”).³⁷ The IMK remained the largest Kurdish Islamist faction, winning the third-largest vote share in the 1992 KRG elections. This was not enough, however, to cross the seven-percent threshold necessary to take parliamentary seats. Hence, both the IMK and its Islamist competitors were excluded from the political landscape. Soon, new factions appeared within the IMK, many with ties to jihadist fighters in Afghanistan. They rejected the party leadership’s pragmatic political program and drifted toward radical Salafi principles.³⁸ The isolated towns of Biyara and Tawela in the mountainous Hawraman region near Halabja became hotbeds of Salafi activity. The IMK-affiliated Center of Islamic Studies published two monthly magazines in Arabic, *Liwa’ al-Shari’a* (banner of shari‘a) and *Akhbar al-Muslimin fi al-‘Alam* (The news of Muslims in the world); ran training courses for youth; and began translating the works of foreign jihadi Salafi imams.³⁹ Starting in 1993, the

35. Idris Siwayli, “گۆرانی گوتاری سه له فی لای گرووپه جیهادییه کانی هه رتیمی کوردستان” [“The change of Salafi rhetoric among jihadi groups in the Kurdistan Region”], Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center (KCCRC), *Islamic Studies* no. 42 (Dec. 2018): 6–7.

36. Natali, *Kurdish Quasi-State*, 129.

37. Idris Siwayli, “یه کگرتوی ئیسلامی کوردستان” [“The Islamic Union of Kurdistan”], KCCRC, September 3, 2018, www.kurdistancc.com/Islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5348.

38. Shareef, “Kurdish Islamists in Iraq,” 28–29; David Romano, “An Outline of Kurdish Islamist Groups in Iraq,” Jamestown Foundation occasional paper (Sept. 2007), <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/Romano-OP.pdf?x79141>.

39. Siwayli, “گۆرانی گوتاری سه له فی” [“The change of Salafi rhetoric”].

PUK, which controlled the areas around Hawraman, moved to liquidate IMK strongholds out of fear the KDP would back the Salafi militants. Between then and 1996 the PUK destroyed jihadi bases, killed more than 1,000 fighters, and captured ‘Usman ‘Abdul‘aziz.⁴⁰ By the end of the decade the IMK had disintegrated.

In the fall of 2001, Mullah Krekar took over a small group called Jund al-Islam (Arabic, “legion of Islam”). Changing its name to Ansar al-Islam (Arabic, “champions of Islam”), Krekar was seen as sympathetic to al-Qa‘ida, if not connected to it. Ansar al-Islam desecrated Naqshbandi Sufi shrines near Halabja.⁴¹ Ansar al-Islam and the Islamic Group of Kurdistan (IGK; sometimes *Komal*, Kurdish for “the Group”), another IMK splinter, sought to establish an Islamic emirate. The PUK appealed to the United States for assistance in rooting out the radical Salafis. Weeks from the invasion of Iraq, US troops and PUK forces attacked Ansar al-Islam and the IGK, killing hundreds. Krekar fled to Iran and eventually exile in Europe.⁴² In many ways, though, Salafism seemed out of step with wider cultural trends within Iraqi Kurdistan. As political scientist Mohammed Shareef noted, Iraqi Kurds “had no grievances at the religious or sectarian levels” with the Iraqi central government.⁴³ Finally, the Salafi movement never posed a real military threat to the KRG, backed by the enormous might of the US. It was a minor spoiler at best.⁴⁴

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the adoption of the new constitution of 2005 radically shifted the space available to Kurdish nationalism. The US helped broker a grand bargain between the KDP and PUK and the largest Shi‘i Islamist factions, namely the Islamic Da‘wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.⁴⁵ In return for backing the new government in Baghdad, the Kurds received recognition of the KRI as an autonomous federal region. Sunni rejectionists, in response, adopted their own sectarian language that borrowed anti-Shi‘i tropes common in Salafi discourse, like there being a Shi‘i “crescent” extending from Tehran through Baghdad to Beirut. Shi‘a were depicted as part of a historical campaign to destroy Sunni “orthodox Islam.”⁴⁶ Kurds, although overwhelmingly Sunni, were implicated in this perfidy. Ahmad al-Khalayila, the founding leader of al-Qa‘ida in Iraq known as Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi, noted the weakness of Salafi sectarian identity among Kurds in 2004:

In their two halves [i.e., the KDP and PUK], [Kurds] have given the bargain of their hands and the fruit of their hearts to the Americans. They have opened their land to the Jews and become their rear base and a Trojan horse for their plans. . . . In

40. Bakawan, “Three Generations,” 12.

41. Human Rights Watch, “Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan,” *Background on the Crisis in Iraq*, February 5, 2003, www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/mena/ansarbk020503.htm.

42. Nader Entessar, “Uneasy Neighbors: Iran and the Kurdish Regional Government,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 77, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsa.2018.0004>.

43. Shareef, “Kurdish Islamists in Iraq” 5.

44. Voller, *Kurdish Liberation Movement*, 119, 129.

45. The Arabic word *da‘wa* means “invitation” but connotes proselytization. Meanwhile, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq later changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.

46. Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 170, 263n33.

general, Islam's voice has died out among them — the Kurds — and the glimmer of religion has weakened in their homes. The Iraqi Da'wa [*sic*] has intoxicated them, and the good people among them, few as they are, are oppressed and fear that birds will carry them away.⁴⁷

Indeed, the main Kurdish Islamist parties tussled under the shadow of the KDP-PUK duopoly. Kurdish Islamists showed little solidarity with their Arab Sunni brethren, who were struggling to gain footing in the new environment. Some of the more radical Kurdish groups did try to join the insurgency. KRG and US forces, though, quickly dispatched most of the Kurdish Salafi insurgents. 'Ali Bapir (b. 1961), a leader of the IGK, was captured by US forces and imprisoned for 22 months because of his connection to the insurgency. Bapir later played down his rebellious streak and came into the political fold. Under his leadership, the IGK has held seats in numerous KRG parliaments and formed part of several ruling coalitions and governments. The IGK offers what it has called “constructive” criticism of the KDP and PUK, but it has remained firmly within the political process.⁴⁸

The contingent status quo between the KRG and the central government grew more fraught with time. There have been tensions over the budget, the disposition of oil reserves, and the status of Kirkuk, which lies outside the official KRI control but which Kurds claim as the heart of their historical homeland. Masoud Barzani (b. 1946), the KDP leader who was KRI president until 2017, argued that Kurdish belonging in Iraq was voluntary and revocable. He and other KDP officials raised the prospect of holding a region-wide referendum on secession, citing Kurds' natural right to self-determination. At home and abroad, Kurdish nationalist leaders touted the autonomous region as politically open, religiously tolerant, and economically advanced.⁴⁹ By the mid-2010s though, the regional economy sputtered and unemployment worsened. The apparent dynamism of the 1990s and early 2000s seemed spent. KDP and PUK elites grew nepotistic and repressive. New opposition movements, like Gorran and the New Generation Movement (founded in 2009 and 2018, respectively), mounted mass demonstrations and made inroads in the regional and federal parliament. The mainstream Kurdish Islamist parties, however, remained mired in infighting and again failed to capitalize on popular disaffection.

In some respects, Kurdish Salafism absorbed popular protest into the milieu of piety. Among Kurds, Salafism could not escape from the shadow of nationalism, however. In February 2020, coauthor Pishtiwan Jalal conducted an online survey of self-selected KRI residents from all four of the region's governorates, using Facebook, the

47. “Zarqawi Letter,” trans. Coalition Provisional Authority, US Department of State (Feb. 2004), <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>.

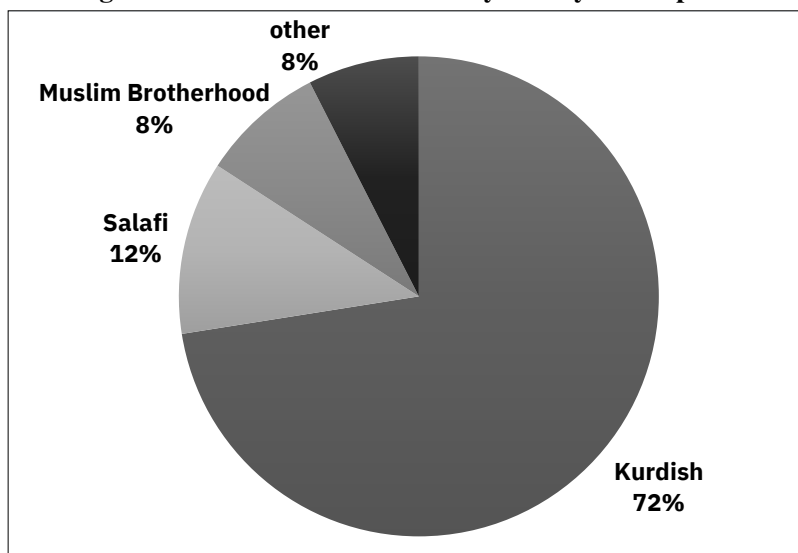
48. In 2021, the IGK formally changed its name to the Justice Group of Kurdistan, and Bapir restyled himself as president of the party instead of emir. See Mehmet Alaca and Bekir Aydoğan, “Challenges to Secular Reforms in the KRI's Biggest Islamist Party,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Fikra Forum*, April 23, 2021, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/challenges-secular-reforms-kris-biggest-islamist-party.

49. Yoosef Abbas Zadeh and Sherko Kirmanj, “The Para-Diplomacy of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and the Kurdish Statehood Enterprise,” *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (Autumn 2017): 587–606. <https://doi.org/10.3751/71.4.14>.

most popular social media platform in the region.⁵⁰ Survey questions are provided in the Appendix. The questionnaire notably uses the Kurdish term *maz'habiya* for “sectarian,” derived from the Arabic word *madhhab*. In traditional usage, *madhhab* usually refers to schools of Islamic law (Hanbali, Hanafi, etc.), while the word *ta'ifa* is used to mean “sect” in the context of Sunnis and Shi'a. Accordingly, scholars usually translate the derived Arabic terms *ta'ifiyya* and *madhhabiyya* as sectarianism and denominationalism, respectively. In Iraqi Kurdish usage, however, the term *ta'ifa* and its derivatives have overtly political connotations associated with conflict or strife. Words derived from *madhhab*, on the other hand, are more neutral and can refer both to Sunnism and Shi'ism and the smaller schools without presupposing conflict.⁵¹

The findings of the survey must be considered tentative and preliminary because of the limited sample size. Yet they offer a more nuanced picture of how Iraqi Kurds have responded to the growth of Salafism and how Salafism interacts with nationalism. Figure I shows that, among 121 respondents,⁵² eighty-seven (71.9%) ranked “Kurdish” as their most important identity (*nasnama*). “Salafi” was a distant second, selected by only fourteen respondents (11.6%), followed by the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*), chosen by ten (8.26%). Meanwhile, forty-eight (40%) of the respondents defined their “sectarian identity” (*nasnama maz'habiya*) as “very important,” while another thirty-five (29%) marked it as “important.” Only thirty-eight people (31%) rated their sectarian identity as “a little important” or “not important” (see Figure II).

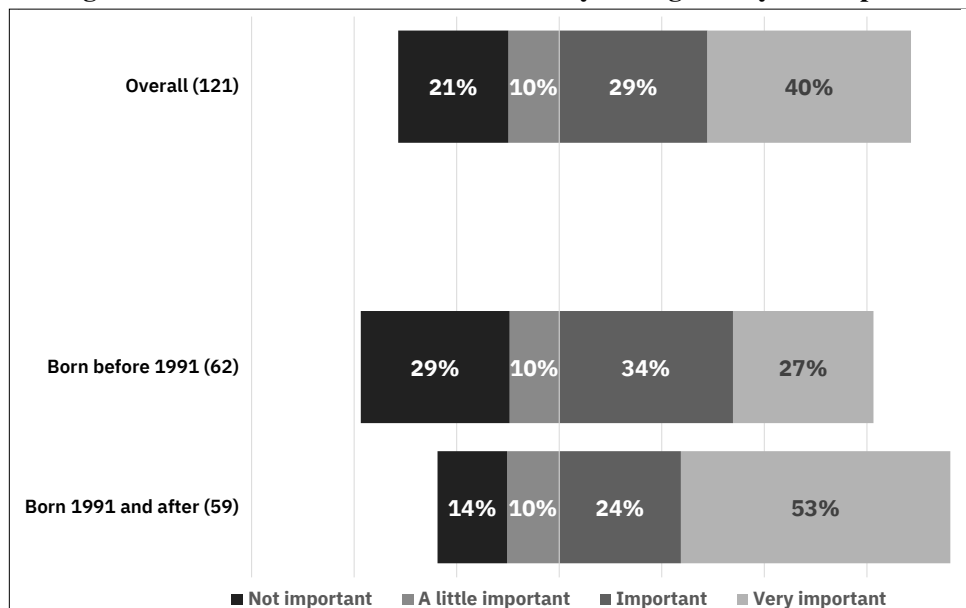
Figure I. Identifications Selected by Survey Participants



50. This survey was implemented under Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board No. 19-482.

51. Shirwan Hamid, “کۆرانی سیاسی و شه‌ری تائیفی” [“Political Change and sectarian (*ta'ifi*) war”], KC-CRC, *Terrorism and Security Studies* no. 51 (May 2019); Birwa Kamal, “شیعه چۆن و له کوێوه سه‌ری هه‌لدا؟” [How and where did Shi'a emerge?], *Diplomatic Magazine*, September 17, 2019, <http://diplomatic-magazine.net/religion/2500>.

52. The number of participants was actually 132, but 11 were excluded from the results because they either filled out only the first question or did the survey twice (based on IP addresses).

Figure II. Prioritization of Sectarian Identity among Survey Participants

Within the survey, the bulk of sectarian sentiment came from respondents born after the formation of the KRG, as shown in Figure II. Those that came of age in the era of Kurdish autonomy were far more likely to attribute significance to their sectarian identity, while respondents from older generations dismissed it. As one prominent activist described the Kurdish Salafi scene in the autonomous region, “there are deep divisions among Salafis, they attack each other verbally every day, some of them are too radical, some of them are under the influence of political parties, and some are too young and inexperienced.”⁵³ In revealing a generational cleavage, this small survey comports with some previous studies about the evolution and entrenchment of Salafism within Iraq since the 1990/91 Gulf War.⁵⁴

For much of the late 2000s and 2010s, the most popular Salafi thinker in Iraqi Kurdistan was probably ‘Abdullatif Ahmad (b. 1969), a veteran of a radical IMK faction who had gone into exile after the 1993 crackdown. Ahmad received religious training at the famous Dar al-Hadith school in Dammaj, Yemen, under Shaykh Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi‘i (1933–2001).⁵⁵ Ahmad associated his preaching with Shaykh Rabi‘ bin Hadi al-Madkhali (b. 1929), an influential Saudi Salafi thinker who stresses personal and social purity along with allegiance to the rightful leadership.⁵⁶ In this sense, Madkhali Salafism served as a boon for the KRG regime. Madkhali

53. Salar Mahmud, “باوکی حارس: بهره‌نگار بوونه‌وی حکومت پیچه‌وانه‌ی دینه” [“Abu Harith: Confronting government is contrary to religion”], *Diplomatic Magazine*, July 16, 2018, <http://diplomaticmagazine.net/religion/858>.

54. Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, 251–338; Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 87–116.

55. Sartip Shekhani, [“رهنه‌نگاره‌وی هزری مه‌دخه‌لی له‌سه‌ر په‌وتی سه‌له‌فیه‌ت له‌کوردستان”] [“The impact of Madkhalism on Salafism in Kurdistan”], *History of Kurd*, August 1, 2016, www.historyofkurd.com/?p=6754.

56. For more on Madkhali theology, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, tr. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

clerics propound that Muslims are obliged to accept even a secular Muslim leader as the rightful ruler (*wali al-amr*) appointed by God to steward the affairs of the community.⁵⁷ With regards to the KRI, they even issued fatwas against mainstream Islamist parties like the KIU, the IKG, and the IMK for launching demonstrations and protests.⁵⁸ Despite his radical roots, Ahmad has unabashedly supported the KRG rulers. He excused their seeming secularism and aversion to Salafism by blaming “secular advisor[s]” and “believers in myth” (a common pejorative for Sufis) for brainwashing the ruling elite. The regime seemed to reciprocate. The KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) permitted Madkhali Salafi imams to hold unofficial meetings in officially recognized mosque space. According to one imam, Ahmad even appeared to have had protection from the KRG internal security forces.⁵⁹

But not all Salafis have been so accommodating. Some deemed Ahmad and his followers as being “soft” (*mumayya'i*) for their willingness to accommodate a system of government that was obviously un-Islamic. Ahmad fired back, accusing his critics of *bid'a* (i.e., heretical innovation deviating from religiously sanctioned doctrine and practice) and moving to ostracize them from the Salafi community.⁶⁰ Among Ahmad's most trenchant critics were followers of the Saudi cleric Ahmad bin 'Umar al-Hazimi, who has been known to be especially harsh toward anyone who appears to support the government. The radicals considered the KRG leadership so irredeemably corrupt as to constitute *taghut* (i.e., unholy diversion from God) and ruled that it was unlawful to obey its orders.⁶¹ But the radicals' criticism did not stop at the regime elite. They also deemed the security forces corrupt for defending the regime and said that fighters killed in combat should not be commemorated as martyrs.⁶² Ahmad and other Madkhali imams, in contrast, offered prayer for the security services and posted footage of their visits to meet soldiers on social media.⁶³ Radical Salafis countered

57. For more on this concept, see Nathan J. Brown, “Who or What Is the *Wali al-Amr*: The Unposed Question,” *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 10, no. 5 (2020): 985–1000. <https://doi.org/10.35295/osls.iisl/0000-0000-0000-1028>.

58. Interview with 'Ali Bapir on به‌رنامه‌ی به‌دانایی [The Badanayi show], Payam TV, YouTube, 52:16, October 12, 2016, <https://youtu.be/yry55MlywgU>.

59. Confidential telephone interview by Pishtiwan Jalal with Kurdish imam A, April 4, 2020.

60. Bekak Abdullah, “چۆن عه‌بدولله‌تێف سه‌له‌فی بانگه‌وازی سه‌له‌فیه‌تی له‌ کوردستان کۆنترۆڵ کرد؟” [“How did 'Abdullatif Salafi control the Salafi school in Kurdistan?”], *Azhans*, March 31, 2018, <https://azhans.krd/بانه‌-بانگه‌-سه‌له‌فی-سه‌له‌فیه‌-سه‌بدولله‌تێف>. Among the imams Ahmad condemned were Muhammad Mala Fayaq and Ahmad Mala Fayaq in Sulaymaniyya; Mullah Bahman in Kalar; Mullah Shadiman in Tuz Khurmatu; Mullah 'Abdulkarim Chwarqurna, Shaykh Abu Manar 'Alami, and Mullah Kamaran in Erbil; and Shaykh Hamdi Salafi in Duhok.

61. 'Abdulhamid Kuri Pak in “رای م. عبدالحمید له‌سه‌ر مه‌دخه‌لیه‌کان که حکومه‌ت به‌ وه‌لی ئه‌مر ئه‌زانن” [“Imam 'Abdulhamid's opinion about Madkhalis who consider the government as *wali al-amr*”], *Islami Mazn*, YouTube, 8:31, August 19, 2017, <https://youtu.be/8aEdKM067vs>; Kamaran Chawshin in “The most powerful speech of Imam Kamaran Karim on what a *taghut* is and how to excommunicate a *taghut*?”], *Islami Mazn*, YouTube, 39:19, February 7, 2019, <https://youtu.be/QfTgCmgWAZI>.

62. “کوری پاک kuri pak شه‌هید کتیه‌؟” [“(Abdulhamid) Kuri Pak: Who is the martyr?”], *Islami Mazn*, YouTube, 0:52, March 23, 2018, <https://youtu.be/wR6uhJ-I8GM>.

63. “به‌میوانداری به‌رێز د. عبداللطیف NRT به‌شی دووهم: مێژووێ مه‌نه‌ه‌جی سه‌له‌فی له‌ کوردستان له‌ که‌نالی “Hosting His Excellency Dr. 'Abdullatif, part two: The history of the Salafi school in Kurdistan, on the NRT channel”], uploaded by Bawki 'Abide, YouTube, 52:08, January 15, 2017, <https://youtu.be/5CSci8IjZM>.

that Ahmad and the Madkhalis were regime stooges, spying on fellow Muslims for the KRG intelligence services.⁶⁴

One of the leading Kurdish acolytes of Hazimi is Halo Hama Rashid, a martial arts instructor who turned his gym in Sulaymaniyya into a recruitment center. Hama Rashid was also employed as an imam in a government mosque until 2015, when there was a crackdown on radicals. Known for rhetoric against Sufis, Shi'a, and anyone he deemed equivocating in faith, Hama Rashid opined in 2019 that 95 percent of Kurds in the KRI were not Muslims.⁶⁵ Like other Salafis, he deems Sufi traditions to be polytheistic and especially dangerous for operating in Islamic space. Kurdish Salafi discourse derides Sufi traditions as “human worship” (*shakhs parsti*) or “tomb worship” (*gor parsti*).

Salafi preachers have also adopted more hardline attitudes toward Shi'a and Iran, especially as tensions with the Shi'i-dominated central government mounted. Until his death in 2018, Kamaran Karim Chawshin was among the most radical Salafis in the KRI and also the most shadowy. He pointedly refused to have a presence on social media or the Internet, which he regarded as forbidden. He may have begun his career as adherent to Madkhali Salafism and even worked with the KDP's internal security services trying to identify and reeducate radicals.⁶⁶ Over time he became vociferously anti-Shi'i. A posthumous recording reveals Chawshin's intense sectarian hatred, using an Arabic derogatory term, he derided Shi'a as “*rafida* [i.e., rejectors] of the faith, including [Prime Minister Nuri al-]Maliki and Iran. They are the cancer of this *umma*, they are the dirt of this *umma* who can only be cleaned through killing. They are infidels, and whoever does not excommunicate them is also an infidel.”⁶⁷

Despite Chawshin's disapproval, social media have proven to be a key battleground between Salafis and other Islamists in Kurdistan. Following the beaming of satellite television from the Kurdish diaspora in the West, the growth of the Internet in Kurdistan has reinforced the use of the Kurdish language in everyday life and is thus closely tied to notions of national identity.⁶⁸ Simultaneously, these same globalizing technological forces have also increased the interactions between Kurdish society and larger trends in the Islamic world. In 2019, the radical Hama Rashid boasted in an online interview about the size of his personal library and how he could use the Inter-

64. “Kuri Pak” [“Kuri Pak: Watch what secular people do to Muslims in Kurdistan, Imam ‘Abd al-Hamid Kuri Pak”], Islami Mazn, YouTube, 14:01, October 4, 2018, https://youtu.be/tII0j_CR-10; telephone interview by Pishtiwan Jalal with Salahaddin Bahaaddin, April 4, 2020; telephone interview by Pishtiwan Jalal with ‘Ali Bapir, April 14, 2020.

65. ‘Abdullatif Ahmad on NRT in و سه له فی و سۆفی هه مووی پێ کافره به ریزی” [“A response to the *tafkiri* Mullah Halo, who excommunicates all imams who are Sufi, Salafi, and Islamist”], YouTube, 3:24, uploaded by Yunis Ahmad, July 20, 2019, <https://youtu.be/gynVelcoh8M>.

66. “Barzan Ramazan talks about Kamaran Chawshin's death”], Kurd TV, YouTube, December 21, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_586BmNh7Y, accessed January 31, 2020.

67. “م. کامهران کریم: ئایا شیعه کافره یان نا؟” [“Imam Kamaran Karim (Chawshin): Are Shi'a infidels?”], Islami Mazn, YouTube, 5:43, July 6, 2018, https://youtu.be/N3Ta9Bw_S4g.

68. Miles Theodore Popplewell, “Imagined Kurds: Media and Construction of Kurdish National Identity in Iraq” (MA thesis, San Francisco State University, Fall 2017); Munir Mohammad, *Social Media and Democratization in Iraqi Kurdistan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

net to get 150 different sources for any commentary.⁶⁹ Sufis, meanwhile, lament Salafi dominance in the social media landscape of Kurdistan. One Sufi imam complained in an interview that Salafis “work day and night and take advantage of every means [and] we are not as active.”⁷⁰

For much of the 2010s, ‘Abdullatif Ahmad and the followers of Madkhali seemed to enjoy media preeminence in the KRI. Ahmad created a website in 2010, www.ba8.org, featuring speeches, articles, and lectures from him and like-minded Salafi imams. It also features an email question box, where the faithful can ask for a legal opinion. As of 2020, the site was generating more than 4,000 hits per day. Ahmad also partnered with the Yemeni shaykh Sadiq al-Baydani and several financial backers in the Gulf to build the premier Kurdish-language Salafi network, al-Athar (Arabic, “impact”). In 2013, Ahmad changed the station’s name to the Amozhgary TV (from Kurdish *amozhgari*, “advice”).⁷¹ Yet Ahmad’s foray into television broadcasts met surprising resistance. Salafis have often regarded the medium with suspicion, treating it as questionable technology that verged too close to entertainment and made sinful programming too accessible. Moreover, Salafi factions wished to distinguish themselves from traditional Islamist political parties, many of which operate television networks like the IGK’s Payam TV, the KIU’s Speda TV, and the IMK’s now-defunct Rabun TV. Several Sufi preachers also have television channels, including Mas’ud Kani Kurdayi (Asman HD), Maz’har Khorasani (Srusht TV), and Hoshyar Isma’il (Tasawuf TV). In fact, before starting his own channel, Ahmad himself had issued a fatwa forbidding the use of zakat funds for television broadcasts. Even some of Ahmad’s allies decried his embrace of the television medium and his apparent use of zakat to finance it. In 2018, Shaykh Madkhali himself, responding to entreaties on the matter, publicly denounced Ahmad.⁷² Nevertheless, Ahmad continues to preach on Amozhgary TV.

It is difficult to measure the overall penetration of Salafi social media in Kurdish society. There are more than 3 million subscribers to some 79 Kurdish-language Islamic YouTube channels.⁷³ Although there are likely people that subscribe to multiple sites, this is a considerable number considering the KRI’s total population is 5.2 million.⁷⁴ The most popular is the channel of the Madkhali Qur’an reciter Raad Mohammad al

69. “ژیانی مامۆستا هه‌ڵۆ له سه‌ر زاری خۆبه‌وه گوێبیست به ، له‌گه‌ڵ وه‌لامی کۆمه‌ڵیک پرسیار.” [“Hear about Imam Halo’s life from his own mouth, with answers to some questions”], Kolagay Din, YouTube, 25:57, March 28, 2019, <https://youtu.be/JKII0f7ssLo>.

70. Confidential telephone interview by Pishtivan Jalal with Kurdish imam C, April 4, 2020.

71. Bahadin Ahmad, “میدیا ئیسلامی له‌ هه‌ریمی کوردستان له‌ تێوان بانگه‌واز و سیاسه‌تدا,” [“Islamic media in the Kurdistan Region between *da’wa* and politics”], KCCRC, *Islamic Studies*, October 17, 2017, www.kurdistan.com/islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5228.

72. Bebak Abdullah, “شێخ ره‌بیع مه‌دخه‌لی: عه‌بدوله‌تیف ئه‌حمه‌د موبته‌دیع و گوهرایه‌” [“Shaykh Rabi’ al-Madkhali: ‘Abdullatif Ahmad commits *bid’a* and is a heretic”], *Azhans*, July 14, 2018, <http://azhans.krd/>. شێخ-ره‌بیع-مه‌دخه‌لی-عه‌بدوله‌تیف-ئه‌حمه‌د-م/م.

73. During the drafting of this article, there had been 87 such channels, but several were removed by YouTube in the intervening months.

74. While there are millions of Kurdish speakers outside the KRI, these pages mainly attract traffic from within the region. Most Kurds in Turkey and Syria speak Kurmanji Kurdish, usually written in Roman script and very different from the Sorani Kurdish spoken in the KRI. While Sorani is also spoken in Iran’s predominantly Kurdish regions, the Islamic Republic routinely blocks access to Western social media platforms such as YouTube.

Kurdi with 2.5 million subscribers.⁷⁵ But more radical jihadist voices are also highly visible. Mullah Krekar, continuing to operate from exile, has 147,000 subscribers to his primary YouTube channel, fatwakrekar, and his messages are often linked to by Baraw Amanj, one of the oldest and largest Kurdish YouTube channels.⁷⁶

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, later simply the Islamic State) cast the role of Salafis in the KRI in new light. As the successor to Zarqawi's al-Qa'ida in Iraq, ISIS presented itself as the standard-bearer of radical Salafism in Iraq's Sunni Arab heartland in the north and west. In 2014, ISIS forces conquered Mosul and came to the outskirts of Erbil, the KRI capital. After initial setbacks, KRG forces regrouped and counterattacked. The KRG forces captured the disputed areas of the Nineveh Plains and the city of Kirkuk. In response to the threat of ISIS, particularly its persecution of Yezidis, some secular-oriented Kurds actually made symbolic conversions to Zoroastrianism or Yezidism as a sign of solidarity.⁷⁷

But ISIS did not only pose an external challenge for the KRG: an estimated 500–2,000 KRI residents joined ISIS, most of whom were from Kurdish Salafi groups. Sociologist Adel Bakawan described the social profile of ISIS's Kurdish recruits as part of a new generation of jihadists, many of whom were unemployed or underemployed and had not found work in the public sector. Radicalization through social media was common.⁷⁸ Others were drawn to fighting through emotion-laden coverage from Al Jazeera or various Kurdish media. The possibility that seemingly apolitical and tolerated Salafis groups might suddenly flip to join ISIS posed a significant threat. As a MERA official put it, "We don't know when [Salafis] will change. It can happen anytime."⁷⁹ An ISIS sleeper cell assaulted the Erbil Governorate building on July 23, 2018, killing one person and wounding two.⁸⁰ KDP forces arrested Salafi imam Isma'il Susayi for plotting the attack. Susayi's confession of allegiance to ISIS was broadcast on KDP-affiliated television. Authorities banned the books of prominent twentieth-century Salafi imams, including the Albanian-Syrian Muhammad Nasir al-Din Albani, the Saudi 'Abd al-Aziz Bin Baz, and the Saudi Muhammad bin Salih al-'Uthaymin. The MERA became more active in monitoring sermons and fired 10 pro-Salafi imams, including the aforementioned Halo Hama Rashid. Meanwhile, Kamaran Karim Chaw-

75. See www.youtube.com/user/RadMohammad.

76. Baraw Amanj used to publish exclusively religious content, often featuring Mullah Krekar. Within the last year or so, the channel has shifted away from religion toward more general social issues. Much of its older content seems to have been removed, leaving only videos of moderate imams. As of publication, it has 373 videos with almost 49 million views, whereas previously it had 1,912 videos with 243.5 million views.

77. Edith Szanto, "Islam in Kurdistan: Religious Communities and Their Practices in Contemporary Northern Iraq," in *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives*, ed. Ronald Lukens-Bull and Mark Woodward (New York: Springer, 2020), 7.

78. Bakawan, "Three Generations"; Adel Bakawan, "Les Kurdes de Daech: Les raisons de la radicalisation d'une génération ["The Kurds of ISIS: The Reasons for Radicalization of a Generation"], *Confluences Méditerranée* no. 102 (2017): 103–17. <https://doi.org/10.3917/come.102.0103>.

79. Judit Neurink, "Iraqi Kurdistan Monitors Salafi Mullahs to Thwart Islamic State Influence" *E Kurd Daily*, May 14, 2015. <https://ekurd.net/iraqi-kurdistan-monitors-salafi-mullahs-to-thwart-islamic-state-influence-2015-05-14>.

80. Azad Lashkari, "Security Forces End Attack on Erbil Governorate by Suspected Islamic State Militants," *Reuters*, July 23, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2O8WDVL>.

shin was arrested in October 2015 and suffered torture at the hands of KDP security services, according to his online biography. He died in February 2018, allegedly from injuries and poisoning received in custody.⁸¹

Both in the public sphere and operating underground, Kurdish Salafis have struggled to reconcile their Islam-prioritizing ideology with their Kurdish identity. Salafism's emphasis on using Arabic textual sources makes many of their main arguments inaccessible to Iraqi Kurds. Indeed, the majority of Kurds in Iraq, especially younger generations, lack even conversational Arabic. Unable or unwilling to engage in Arab cultural practices, Kurdish Salafis instead operate within the Kurdish cultural vernacular. A telling and visible display of this phenomenon is in the way Salafis dress. The stereotypical Salafi male costume is a white tunic known in Arabic as a *thawb* or *dish-dasha*, worn to signify devotion by imitating the purported dress of the Prophet Muhammad.⁸² Salafis in the KRI, in contrast, have adopted the costume of Kurdish rural elites — a black and white turban, jacket, cummerbund, and wide, short-hemmed pants. Such garb appears antiquated among urbanized Kurds but still nods to Kurdish national traditions. This effort to link Salafism with Kurdish nationhood is evident in other facets as well. For instance, the aforementioned YouTube sensation Raad Mohammad al-Kurdi uses the Arabic epithet *al-Kurdi* ("the Kurd") to announce his ethnic origins. This sense of affiliation is trenchant even among the multinational ranks of ISIS, where Kurdish jihadis formed separate brigades named after Kurdish Islamic heroes, like the Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi Brigade in honor of the Ayyubid sultan Saladin (1137–93).⁸³

No issue was of greater importance to Kurdish nationalist aspirations than having a referendum on KRI independence. A nonbinding referendum was held in early 2005 in tandem with that year's regional and federal elections, almost a year before Iraq adopted its federalist constitution. Debates about whether to have a more official one remained and became more heated as Erbil's relations with Baghdad worsened. KRG president Masoud Barzani and the ruling KDP touted a referendum as a way to assert Kurdish self-determination. Barzani argued that the Kurds deserved a chance for independence after contributing so significantly to the defeat of ISIS. A referendum was finally held September 25, 2017, asking voters in Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish, and Neo-Aramaic, "Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the Region to become an independent state?" Over 90 percent of voters answered in favor of independence.⁸⁴

'Abdullatif Ahmad and other Madkhali-oriented Salafis fully backed the referendum. In this respect, they placed their Sunni sectarian identity in the service of Kurdish nationalism. In a televised address in July 2017, Ahmad remarked that prospects

81. "سه‌بركه‌ن م.هه‌لۆ چۆن باسی م.كامهران كه‌ريم نه‌كا ☺ ماموستا هه‌لۆ م.هه‌لۆ." ["Watch how Imam Halo describes Imam Kamaran Karim ☺ Imam Halo I. Halo"], *Islami Mazn*, YouTube, 2:21, February 18, 2021, <https://youtu.be/POTC6OeID3c>. Mainstream Kurdish media have avoided reporting on Chawshin's death, but it is discussed on social media by his followers and other radical imams.

82. Joas Wagemakers, "Salafism and the Religious Significance of Physical Appearances," *OUP-blog*, January 11, 2017, <https://blog.oup.com/2017/01/salafism-physical-appearances>.

83. Farhad Sa'idi, "كوردانی ناو داعش، شوواناس و کاریگه‌رییان" ["Kurds inside ISIS, their identity and influence"], *Azhans*, November 10, 2016, <https://azhans.krd/کاریگه‌رییا/شوواناس-و-کاریگه‌رییا>.

84. Dylan O'Driscoll and Bahar Baser, "Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 11 (2019): 2016–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1617631>.

of a secular-oriented Kurdish state did not perturb him. In fact, he went further, stating that “any Kurd who stands against this referendum is not a good Kurd.”⁸⁵ The day before the vote, on Amozhgary TV, Ahmad compared the status of the Kurds with other Muslims polities:

Why is it okay for the people of Bahrain, whose population is less than a million, to have their own state? It is okay for Kuwait to have a state? It is okay for Emiratis to have a state? It is okay for Turkey to have a state? It is okay for all of those to have their own state, but is it not okay for the Kurdish nation — which numbers more than 40 million — to have a state? This has no place in Allah’s shari’a. Therefore, we do not want anyone to use religion and shari’a and tell this oppressed nation not to demand its rights.⁸⁶

Importantly, Ahmad did not limit this claim to Kurdish statehood to Kurds residing in the KRI or even in Iraq. For him, the entire Kurdish nation, spread across multiple countries, deserves self-determination. Ahmad warned that “Turks, Persians, and Arabs . . . today have united against us.” His theological defense of the referendum acknowledged the power of national statehood. Ahmad supposed that if Muslims

were all living under one caliphate and only Kurds asked for separation, then they will have the right to call us traitors. But this is not the case anymore. Every nation has its own sovereignty, except for the Kurds, who so far do not have a home of their own.⁸⁷

Outspoken radicals, like Halo Hama Rashid and Kamaran Chawshin, were uncharacteristically mute about the referendum, perhaps realizing that there was no good trying to oppose such a popular measure but also refusing to legitimize it. The exiled Mullah Krekar was more vocal in his opposition. He criticized the referendum as a political ploy to distract from the Barzani regime’s abuses of power and to deceive Kurds with the promise of a national homeland. By the same token, though, he pointed out that voting itself was superfluous because “there will not be a Kurd who does not vote for it, neither Communists nor Islamists will say no. We are all for a Kurdish state.”⁸⁸

The referendum brought swift blowback. The Iraqi central government rejected the plebiscite as illegal and massed troops near the disputed territories. Iran and Turkey blockaded the KRI. The US pressured Barzani to back down. In October 2017, after a brief confrontation, Kurdish forces retreated from Kirkuk, and the Iraqi army and allied Shi’i militias retook the city. Barzani resigned the KRG presidency. Bucking the KDP,

85. “زەهێ دکتۆر عبداللطیف أحمد لەسەر سەرپه‌خۆیی کوردستان” [“Dr. ‘Abdullatif Ahmad’s opinion regarding Kurdistan’s independence”], *Rûdaw*, 0:32, uploaded to YouTube by W.M.Salafi Rawand Bahasht AMOZHGARY HD & W.E.A, July 10, 2017, https://youtu.be/LGY79qp_jwo.

86. “دکتۆر عبداللطیف أحمد روونکردنه‌وه‌یه‌کی تایبەت سەبارەت بە ریفراڤدۆم” [“A special clarification from Dr. ‘Abdullatif Ahmad about the referendum”], Amozhgary TV, 21:33, uploaded to YouTube by Jihad Abdulaziz, September 24, 2017, <https://youtu.be/h9b2Ixu7ATA>.

87. “دکتۆر عبداللطیف أحمد روونکردنه‌وه‌یه‌کی تایبەت سەبارەت” [“A special clarification from Dr. ‘Abdullatif Ahmad”], Amozhgary TV.

88. Mullah Krekar on NRT in 2017, available in “مەلا کرێکار لەم باره‌یه‌وه” [“Why was the referendum conducted!? Mullah Krekar’s view in that regard”], YouTube, 9:27, uploaded by Ibrahim Aziz, April 1, 2021, <https://youtu.be/lAYv99mDp3k>.

the PUK opened negotiations with the federal government. But Kurdish Salafis did not take the opportunity to repudiate the idea of Kurdish nationalism. Mullah Krekar urged Salafists, Sufis, jihadis, and the Muslim Brotherhood to come together to form an Islamic emergency committee. He bemoaned the influence of non-Kurdish religious scholars on Kurdish society:

A Kurdish Muslim youth lives in Erbil, yet he reads a booklet written by a Qatari imam and he falls under that imam's influence. Another Kurdish Muslim youth lives in Sulaymaniyya and he reads a book written by an imam from Yemen or Morocco and he is easily influenced by them.⁸⁹

At the same time, Krekar also enlisted Kurdish nationalism into his larger campaign. Invoking the dynasty that converted Iran to Shi'ism in 1501 and fought over modern-day Iraq for some 150 years, a rhetorical frame common in Salafi discourse, Krekar called for resistance against Baghdad's "neo-Safavid War" and criticized the KRG's strategic reliance on Iranian support. "You cannot fight a sectarian war with an ethnic one. It is us as Sunnis versus Iran and all Shi'a."⁹⁰ Krekar thus used the aftermath of the referendum to further sectarianize Kurdish identity and to induct Kurdish nationalism to the cause of the Sunni sectarian struggle.

CONCLUSION

Salafism remains a relatively small, although expanding, movement within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The regional government's efforts to contain the movement have proven increasingly ineffective, even as the regime adopted more repressive measures, such as censorship, expelling imams, and even imprisoning Salafi leaders. Salafis use social media platforms that circumvent many regime controls. Moreover, officially sanctioned imams and prayer leaders have mounted a paltry defense of the regime. Compared to the plethora of content available on Kurdish Salafi websites and satellite stations, officially sanctioned imams and their Sufi allies speak for little more than 30 minutes a week at Friday prayers to relatively meager audiences.

Putting the Salafis of the KRI into comparative perspective helps to elucidate the ideational and organizational options for future evolution. The idea that Salafism and nationalist struggles are antithetical and irreconcilable is clearly overstated. Salafis in Iraqi Kurdistan have found ways to reconcile their theological and religious demand with nationalist ideas of self-determination, much like the case of the secessionist movement in southern Yemen. These measures may have begun out of pragmatism, but they have grown into fuller intellectual commitments. Iraqi Kurdish Salafis do not ignore the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) or keep it at arm's length. Instead, they orient their political engagements directly at the de facto rulers. This example rebuts the idea that Salafi doctrine is inflexible and set against modern nationalism. On the contrary, Salafis have embraced and integrated nation-statehood into their political program.

89. Mullah Krekar, "خيانة تي 16 ئۆكتۆبەر + مه ترسی ئیرانی شیعه بو کوردستان + کۆمه ل و عه لی باپیر پیاوی ئیران" ["The betrayal of October 16 + Shi'i Iran's threat to Kurdistan + the IGK and 'Ali Bapir, agents of Iran"], *fatwakrekar*, 51:45, YouTube, October 20, 2018, https://youtu.be/_A3cwbrVTpM.

90. Mullah Krekar, "خيانة تي 16 ئۆكتۆبەر" ["The betrayal of October 16"].

Still, the cooperation between certain Salafi groups and the KRG may only go so far. Comparisons with previous iterations of Islamist movements in Kurdistan and with other Salafi groups suggest two distinct, although not mutually exclusive, future pathways. The first is further radicalization, as was illustrated by the case of Kamaran Karim Chawshin, whose religious views took him from supporting the regime to violent opposition. Much of Salafi history has been characterized by radicalization through outbidding, as groups have competed among themselves to demonstrate their fervor. Previous Islamist groups in Kurdistan have followed a similar pattern of fragmentation and infighting. A second possible pathway is more direct Salafi involvement in party politics. The idea of a Salafi political party would have seemed oxymoronic not too long ago. But examples like Egypt's Al-Nour Party highlight the viability of this option, especially as Salafis seek to avoid being tainted for the apparent failures of their regime allies. 'Abdullatif Ahmad and his Madkhali allies may point in this direction if they seek more substantive and political roles within the KRG.

Besides revisiting the assumptions about Salafism and nationalism, this article has also pushed to reconsider the dominance of Kurdish nationalism in the KRI. The region's two ruling parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, certainly fit the mold of secular nationalist movements. But Islamist factions have often contested secular hegemony by offering an alternative nationalist narrative in which religion plays a bigger role. The dominance of secularist nationalism may itself be waning. Even with few adherents, the contemporary Salafi turn in Iraqi Kurdistan helps further interject sectarianization into Iraqi Kurdish politics. Salafism's stress on sectarian identity has helped to reframe the KRI's drive for self-determination and its grievances against Baghdad. The alliance between the Kurdish nationalists and the Shi'i Islamist parties that has defined Iraqi politics since 2003 grew progressively rockier through the 2010s as the KRG and the federal government sparred over territorial boundaries, natural resources, and political power. Sectarian consciousness opens up the possibility, especially for younger Kurds, to consider common cause with Sunni Arabs against a Shi'i-dominated regime. The KRI, in this sense, is not exempt from the sectarian pressures evident elsewhere in Iraq or the wider Middle East. At the same time though, Salafism in the KRI is refracted through a distinctly local lens, creating unique forms of social and political engagement.

Such sectarianization has ramifications for Kurdish politics across the region. Unlike in Iraq, where the Kurdish population is overwhelmingly Sunni, about one in four Iranian Kurds are Shi'a. Iranian Kurdish militant groups are more likely to draw recruits from predominantly Kurdish Sunni areas than Shi'i ones, suggesting that sectarian alienation from the Islamic Republic is a driver of Kurdish ethnic unrest. Moreover, there are increasing signs of Salafi influence among Iranian Kurds, with Iranian authorities arresting and executing Iranian Kurds accused of associating with al-Qa'ida.⁹¹ Such sectarianization can have unintended consequences for Iraqi Kurds. For decades, the KRG's foreign policy has depended on good relations with external states — including Iran, Turkey, and the United States — as a way to counterbalance the central government. These relationships though will be strained if Kurdish national aspirations become embroiled in regional sectarian conflicts that pit Sunnis against Shi'a.

91. Güneş Murat Tezcür and Peyman Asadzade, "Ethnic Nationalism versus Religious Loyalty: The Case of Kurds in Iran," *Nations and Nationalism* 25, no. 2 (Apr. 2019): 652–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12424>.

APPENDIX

Relevant Questions from the February 2020 Survey

7. به کامه لهه ناسنامانه ی خواره وه خۆت ده ناسینیت؟

- ا. کورد
- ب. سه له فی
- ج. سوفی یا خود پالپشتی ته ریه ته
- د. ئیخوان
- ه. بئ دین
- ف. هی تر

7. Which of the following identities do you identify with?

- a. Kurdish
- b. Salafi
- c. Sufi or *tariqat* supporter*
- d. *Ikhwan* [i.e., Muslim Brotherhood]
- e. no religion
- f. other

8. تا چه ند ناسنامه مه زهه بیه که ی خۆت به لاهه گرنگه؟

- ا. گرنگ نیه
- ب. تۆزیک گرنگه
- ج. گرنگه
- د. زۆر گرنگه

8. How important is your sectarian identity to you?

- a. not important
- b. a little important
- c. important
- d. very important

* Referring to an order within the Sufi tradition, from the Arabic *tariqa*. The question was posed as such because many Iraqi Kurds follow Islamic teachings inflected with Sufi traditions but only those dedicated and committed to a *tariqat* are considered Sufis.