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The hybridisation of religion and nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan: the case of Kurdish Islam

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ABSTRACT

This paper asks two interlinked questions: 1) How do Kurdish Islamists navigate the dilemma of having to relate to Islamism and nationalism at the same time? 2) Why have Kurdish authorities in Iraq taken steps to centralise control over religious activities since 2014? The paper argues that nationalism and Islamism have a long history of being intertwined in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a de facto state. Kurdish Islamists, even Salafis, must relate to Kurdish nationalism to keep their followers. But they also believe in the specificity of Kurdish culture and identity, and support Kurdish statehood. The hybridisation of Islamism and nationalism in KRI has gone further since 2014, attributable to new political pressures in the religious field after Daesh. Kurdish political authorities intervene in the religious field by bureaucratising Islam, co-opting Islamic figures and promoting Kurdish Islam. Our argument is that state co-optation of religion is a step in the process towards state- and nation-building, but it is also a way of taking greater control of society. Analysing the Kurdish case, our paper takes an empirical approach informed by contextual and case-sensitive knowledge.

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Introduction

The occupation of a third of Iraq by the self-declared Islamic State (Daesh) in 2014 had profound effects on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The participation of Kurdish peshmerga in the Global Coalition against Daesh gave international support and high hopes for a Kurdish state in Iraq sooner rather than later. However, Baghdad's rejection of the Kurdish referendum for independence (25 September 2017), and the take-over of Kirkuk and other disputed areas by Iraqi security forces in October, dashed those same aspirations, reverting the KRI boundaries back to the disputed frontier drawn in 2003.

Less known than the impact of Daesh's occupation on Kurdish statehood are the consequences of the struggle against Daesh in the religious sphere and on Islamist movements in Kurdistan. The attempts of hundreds of young Kurds to join the group since 2014 has led KRI authorities to take new measures to combat radicalism and standardise religious discourse in Kurdistan. The framework for this religious

standardisation is interesting in itself, as it can be seen in light of similar mechanisms of control of Islam created in other countries in the Middle East since 2013 (see Gade 2019; Gade and Fahmi 2020), designed to contain and prevent the recruitment to jihadi groups. Yet the Kurdish case is potentially much more interesting than many other cases, because it is a case of a de facto state (Voller 2014), and Kurdish nationalism plays a central role in Erbil-Baghdad conflicts. Some of the arrangements to standardise Islam in KRI also served the goal of promoting Kurdish nationalism, and making Islam in Kurdistan 'more Kurdish'.

Unlike the case of Rojava (the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria), which is influenced by the political ideology of Kurdistan's Worker Party (PKK), the main political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan aspire to establish an independent Kurdish state. Currently, the political representation of the Kurds in the Middle East is dominated by two projects: statehood in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is led by its two main political parties (the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK); and 'democratic confederalism', which is led by PKK and manifested in Rojava (Yildiz 2019). The KDP-led project sees a nation-state as a solution to the Kurdish problem, with religious nationalism as an integral part. The PKK, on the other hand, has been a socialist and left-wing organisation since its inception. This has had a significant impact not only on their approach to the Kurdish issue but also on their understanding of the role of religion.

Observing the debate about religion and Kurdish culture in Iraqi Kurdistan, this paper asks: How do Kurdish Islamists navigate the dilemma of having to relate to Islam and Kurdish nationalism at the same time? Why have Kurdish authorities in Iraq taken steps to centralise religious activities and use the legitimising reference to religion since 2014? Should the new policies of institutionalising Islam be understood as a step towards increasing state-building within a de facto state, or rather attempts by political authorities to centralise power by taking control of parts of society (i.e. religious activities)?

The paper shows that Kurdish authorities in Iraq have increasingly started to use Islam to make arguments about the superiority of Kurdish identity. Kurdish religious nationalists argue that religious practice and religious thought in Kurdistan differ from the religious practice and religious thought that they see as prevalent in the Arab world, 'Arab Islam'.¹ Moreover, Kurdish Islamists – including the conservative and literalist Salafis – must also situate themselves with the Kurdish national cause and address the issue of Kurdish statehood to gain and keep followers. Hence, Islamism in Kurdistan is almost always tainted by some degree of Kurdish nationalism.

Through the Kurdistan case, our paper illustrates the more general point that Islamists in de facto states or state-like entities with strong ethno-nationalist movements must situate themselves in relation to both Islamism and nationalism at the same time. This goes in particular for Islamists close to Muslim Brotherhood thought, but also for Kurdish Salafis, who use Kurdish folklore to legitimise themselves as Kurdish. In doing so, Kurdish Islamists create hybridised forms of Islamism and nationalism. Former Islamists have moved towards Kurdish religious nationalism; movements influenced by Muslim Brotherhood thought have adopted an Islamo-nationalist stances. Salafis (both political Salafis and quietists) also relate to Kurdish nationalism (see Jalal and Ahram 2021). Importantly, all categories are constantly transformed and renegotiated, and there is also some ambiguity within organisations as to how actors relate to Kurdish nationalism

and the idea of a Kurdish Islam. Our paper shows in detail how Islamism and nationalism were hybridised in Kurdistan after the emergence of Daesh and during the move towards the independence referendum in 2017.

We define Islamism broadly, as 'Islamic activism', or the act of 'somebody who exerts a systematic religious effort which goes beyond the ritual observance of Islam and which is not organised by the state' (Hegghammer 2007, 76). This includes organisations inspired by Muslim Brotherhood (Ikwani) thought, as well as Salafis. We see Salafis as constituting a branch of Islamism (see below). Salafism is an ultra-orthodox and literalist branch of Sunni Islamism that claims to emulate the lifestyle and religion of the pious ancestors (alsalaf al-ṣāliḥ, or the first three generations of Muslims) (Wagemakers 2016). It is a globalised and contemporary reinvention of Wahabism, a form of Islam that developed in Saudi Arabia in the 18th century.

This study employs a methodology of qualitative analysis, including 20 in-person interviews with Islamic intellectuals and scholars, government and parliament officials and members as well as civil society representatives and researchers. The interviews were conducted in KRI provinces of Erbil and Sulaimaniyah between September 2018 and March 2020. Some interviews were conducted with both authors present; others by only one of the two authors. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. With the permission of the interviewees, we recorded the interviews, and subsequently transcribed them. Some of the interviewees preferred to be anonymous. The interviewees gave both verbal, and then written, consent to participate. We explicitly asked for their permission to be named prior to the publication of this article. The interviews were conducted in Kurdish, English and Arabic. We triangulated these sources with the reading of media articles and a study of Kurdish TV and radio shows about Islam, and also engaged in participatory observation of religious activities.

The paper first reviews existing literature on religion and state-building in KRI and comparative studies. Second, it provides background information on relevant actors in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq: Kurdish religious nationalists, the Kurdish national movement, Islamists and Salafis, with a historical overview of how nationalism and religion intersect in Kurdistan. Third, the paper discusses the role of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in bureaucratising and co-opting religious activities and promoting Kurdish Islam. Fourth, the paper analyses the reactions of the Islamists to these policies.

Literature on religion and state-building in Iraqi Kurdistan

The KRI has been de facto autonomous from Baghdad since 1991; in 2005, Kurdistan gained federal status in Iraq. Moreover, over the past two decades, the region has developed many state-like competences (from security to border control, among others) that have laid the foundations of a de facto state (Palani et al. 2019, 2283). De facto states are defined as states that have obtained the most common criteria of statehood, such as population, authority, territorial control and the ability to conduct foreign relations, but lack international legal recognition (Caspersen 2012, 12). Kurdistan's strategies to gain international recognition have been shaped significantly by the Iraqi Kurds' desire to distinguish themselves culturally, politically and economically from the rest of Iraq (Voller 2014; Palani et al. 2021).

Existing literature on state- and nation-building in KRI focuses heavily on internal political rivalry (see MacQueen 2015; Aziz and Cottey 2021) and the Kurdish entity's security issues within itself and in the region (see, for example, Bengio 2012; Voller 2014; Romano and Gurses 2014). What has received less attention is how the governance and practices of religion dovetail nation or state-building processes in Kurdistan, the politics behind such procedures and the heterogeneous approaches to such policies. This paper attempts to connect the dots between the literature on state-building in KRI and the existing, though sparse, scholarship on Islam in Kurdistan.

Unlike the case of Kurdish nationalism and Islam in Turkey (Kurt 2017; Al 2019; Gurses 2019, 160), the sphere of Kurdish Islam and Islamist movements in Iraqi Kurdistan remains thus far under-studied. In addition, the literature in Kurdish is largely biased, either defending the Islamists, or attacking them, with no attempt to conceptualise the Islamism in Iraqi Kurdistan in the context of the existing theories of religion and nation.

Interest in the study of Islam and nationalism has increased recently in the literature on Kurdistan. It has expanded its research scope to explore and include the connections and perspectives of different Kurdish Islamist movements towards Kurdish nationalism, such as Salafis (Jalal and Ahram 2021) and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) (Mustafa 2021). Jalal and Ahram (2021) study the relationship between Salafism and nationalism, arguing that Salafis in Kurdistan also link their struggle to the Kurdish ethno-nationalist cause. Mustafa (2021) studies the relationship between nationalism and KIU. Both studies are useful for these issues, but they do not conceptualise or mention the rise of Kurdish Islam. Moreover, the studies have not been able to analyse what nationalising Islam means for the broader process of state-building in the Middle East.

Our study will fill this gap, and by bringing in new primary data it will conceptualise how Kurdish Islam is situated within the broader ideological field in KRI. Moreover, we argue that religious nationalism is integral to state-building in a de facto state, but that controlling religion is also part of a project of domestic politics to centralise power.

Compared to the Palestinian territories, a similar case of de facto state, Islamists (Islamist-nationalists) remain much weaker in KRI. The Islamisation of the Palestinian cause and the reasons for the rise of Hamas have been studied elsewhere (see Pavlowsky 2000; Dot-Pouillard 2018; for the writings of Palestinian Islamists, see Skare 2021b). For the sake of the comparison with Iraqi Kurdistan, one obvious difference between the Palestinian and Kurdish cases is that the growing Iranian and Arab Gulf sponsorship of the Palestinian cause since the 1987–1993 Intifada led to increased Islamisation (see also: Kepel 2002, 153), while, in the Kurdish case, Western support and the Kurdish desire to create boundaries around (their perception of) Arab culture and Turkish culture have led to the opposite result, the weakening of Kurdish Islamism. In addition, the Kurdish issue in Iraq has traditionally been an issue around ethnic identity and differences. To add to this, the dominant perception exists that Islam has been used historically by the states in the region, and previously the Ottoman and Persian Empires, against the Kurdish aspirations to independence (see Romano and Gurses 2014). These limitations, as well as the weakness of the Islamists in KRI, can explain why it is apparently easy for KRI authorities to 'reconcile' with mainstream Islamist groups over the relationship between national and religious identities. The on-going nature of the nationalist

struggle in both cases might also be the reason why Islamo-nationalist parties, like Hamas in Palestine, have had more popular appeal than global Islamism in these countries (See: Kepel 2002, 153; for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, see Skare 2021a).

Background: religious-nationalist, nationalist and Islamist movements in Iraqi Kurdistan

Religious nationalism until 1990

It is a myth that nationalism necessarily acts as a secularising and modernising force (Soleimani 2016, 3; Freas 2018, 319; see also Carré 1993, 53; Salamé 1995). Nationalism can be secular or religious; many national narratives and identities are based on a particular religion (Veer 2013, 4). In religious nationalism, there is a reciprocal influence of nationalism and religion (Soleimani 2016, 3). Examples of religious nationalism include Hindu nationalism in India, religious Zionism in Israel or Turkish nationalism (Juergensmeyer 1996), in addition to Kurdish religious nationalism.

Although Kurdish nationalist movements in recent decades have been known as non-religious, led by secular or leftist leaders, the first Kurdish nationalists had a religious background (Mustafa 2021, 38–39). Kurdish Islamic thought and *hujra* (religious schools in the historical Ottoman space), and leaders of Kurdish national liberation movements who have drawn inspiration from aspects of their Islamic faith, all have a long history (Gharib 2017).

The leaders of the Kurdish national liberation movements from the 19th and early 20th century onwards were traditionally prominent religious personalities, mostly from the Naqshbandi Sufi order (Tariqa) (Shareef 2017, 16). Naqshbandia Tariqa is a well-known branch of Sufism that originated in Bukhara in Central Asia and spread to India, Turkey, Kurdistan and the Middle East. Mawlana Khaled al-Naqshbandi, a Sufi leader also known as sheikh Diya al-Din Khalid al-Shahrazuri (1779–1827), brought the renovated Naqshbandia order to Kurdistan in 1811. He trained more than 120 followers and established a network of supporters across Kurdistan (Khoury 2016, 116–118).

The Kurdish religious and tribal leader (sheikh) Mustafa Barzani, who along with his followers went on to found KDP in 1946, derived much of his legitimacy from his status as the head of the Barzani order. This is a sub-branch of the Naqshbandia order in Kurdistan, and Barzani was known as ‘Mullah Mustafa’ (Jafi 2018). Thus, for historical reasons, political, tribal and religious authority continued to overlap in the second half of the 20th century in Kurdistan. The overlap of Sufism and tribalism is otherwise unusual in the Muslim world; usually Sufi sheikhs are not tribal leaders; Barzani and the Kurdish case therefore constitute an exception.

Jalal Talabani, who seceded from KDP then led by Mustafa Barzani to found PUK in 1975, was a prominent member of the Qadiriyya Tariqa in southern Kurdistan; he was also inspired by the political left (Bruinessen 1999, 2000).

Mainstream Kurdish nationalists in Iraq (1950s-2000s)

Kurdish nationalist movements in Iraq long maintained their tribal-religious loyalties alongside national allegiance. Tribal and clan loyalties stood in an ambiguous relationship with nationalism (Bruinessen 1992, 7; Bengio 2012, 12). Moreover, Kurdish

nationalist politicians were never pushed into confrontation with the religious establishment (Greaves 2017, 62). The first Kurdish nationalists had come from the traditional leadership of *aghas* (the tribal chieftain) and sheikhs (the popular mystics or saints). These traditional leaders used their special status in Kurdish society as well as primordial loyalties in order to bring the Kurdish masses into the movement (Bruinessen 1992, 7; Bengio 2012, 12).

In the mid 20th century, Iraqi Kurdish nationalist activism witnessed a transformation, from the religious and the tribal to a more organised ethnic (anti-Iraqi state) and non-religious form of nationalist movement, which embraced some of the forms of a modern political structure (Rafaat 2018, 53; Gunter 2013, 37; Jabar 2006, 303). According to Hassanpour, 'by the 1960s, the modern nationalist ideas had developed into a coherent system of thought that was named *Kurdayeti*, (Kurdish term for "Kurdishness")', which was, he says, 'basically secular or ethnic nationalism' (Cited in Bengio 2012, 5). This transformation was driven significantly by 1) a response to government centralising policies in Baghdad, directed against Kurds; and 2) the emergence of more urban, intellectual, and socialist, nationalist voices in the 1940s (see McDowall 2003, 287).

After the Kurdish uprising against the Ba'th regime in 1991, and the imposition of the no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel, the Kurdish region in Iraq gained de facto self-rule (Voller 2014, 69–70). However, a civil war between the KDP and PUK soon broke out (1994–1998); in 1998, the two separate administrations were created (see, for example, Voller 2014). Both entities professed similar clan or family-based nationalism.

Kurdish Islamist and Islamo-nationalist parties

At present, Islamists in Kurdistan are aligned with nationalist and other types of political organisations in supporting the Kurdish right to statehood.

However, Islamo-nationalism is the result of a longer process of adaptation. Islamist movements inspired by Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwani*) thought emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Baziani 2006; Romano 2007).² Prior to that period, there were Kurdish members in the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood, created in 1951 in Baghdad and Mosul (Al-'Azami 2002 in Jabar 2006, 164). The first ethnically Kurdish Islamist parties, such as the Islamic Society Movement founded in 1984, and the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan founded in 1987, were engaged in armed struggle against the Ba'th regime, in alliance with the more secular nationalist and leftist groups, and supported by Iran (Bruinessen 1992, 40).

The two mainstream Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK refused political Islam, which they saw as a threat to their power and as 'alien' to Kurdish society. The two parties used military and hard power to confront Islamist ideology. Most importantly, they fought Kurdish Islamists in Halabja along the Iranian border in the early 1990s and early 2000s (Voller 2014, 128–130). While the Islamist groups posed a threat to the Kurdish ruling parties, this effort also helped to improve the image of the Kurds in the eyes of the United States and to close ranks with it on the eve of the 2003 Iraq War (Bengio 2012, 277; Voller 2014, 127–128). After the 9/11 2001 attacks in the US, KDP and PUK took leading roles in the US-led War on Terror in Iraq by attacking and countering Kurdish jihadists. Moreover, the two Kurdish parties also tried to make use of Kurdistan's state-like institutions and official Islamic organisations, such as the Kurdistan Islamic Union of Scholars and the

Ministry of Endowments, to counter what they perceived as ‘radical Islam’. In addition, the two parties developed a discourse that accuses the Kurdish Islamists of wanting to ‘Arabise’ Kurdish society (Saddiq 2015; International Crisis Group [ICG] 2003).

The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan split in the 1990s, and three separate Islamist parties in Iraqi Kurdistan emerged: the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) in 1994; the Kurdistan Islamic Group in 1999; in addition to the Islamic Movement (Baziani 2006, 81). KIU is the most moderate of the three, and received inspiration early on from the organisations of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimim) across the Arab world and from Arab Islamists like Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The party was created as a moderate, peaceful party, in opposition to the weaponised trend represented by the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan in the 1990s (Fatih Mohamed, interview, scholar, November 2018).

Moreover, the Islamic Movement’s internal divisions also gave rise to radical, jihadi organisations such as the Islamic Jihad Group, Jund al-Islam, and al-Islah, and later Ansar al-Islam in 2001 (Baziani 2006; Lia 2015, 34).

After the regime change in Iraq in 2003, Kurdish Islamist parties all accepted the new political process and the first elections under the US-led occupation. Iraqi Kurdistan’s three Islamist parties all entered parliament. This was a significant shift, especially for the Islamic Group and the Islamic Movement, which were created from the outset as armed movements and ‘jihad’ (against Saddam Hussein’s regime) was officially part of their political manifesto (Siwaili 2018).³ Fearing targeted US bombings against them, the Islamist parties laid down their weapons. Moreover, the armed struggle had lost much of its popular support and public appeal, and the Kurds saw the new status of Kurdistan as a Federal Region within Iraq as an opportunity. The acceptance by Kurdish Islamist parties of the political process under the US occupation of Iraq shows they put their Kurdish cause before their Islamic anti-imperialism.

Today, all three parties are part of the peaceful, moderate parliamentary opposition.⁴ They are also deeply involved in the political process, with the flexibility to align with non-Islamic movements in Kurdistan. Examining the recent KRI elections (2009, 2013 and 2018), the political crises (such as the 2015 presidential crisis and the 2017 Referendum for Independence) and alliances (such as the 2014 government formation), shows that the increase or decrease in the votes of the Islamic parties are driven less by people’s perceptions of Islam, and more by the political position of the parties and how they have reacted to political developments. Moreover, in a step further away from Islamism, the Islamic Group, the second largest Islamic party in Kurdistan, in February 2021 changed its name from the Kurdistan Islamic Group to the Kurdistan Justice Group, giving their two main reasons as openness to society and a broadening of access to the wider population (Payam 2021).

Kurdish Salafism: the other Kurdish Islamism

The Salafis constitute another position within the field of Kurdish Islamism, distinct from the groups inspired by Muslim Brotherhood thought. We have already defined Salafism as an ultra-orthodox and literalist branch of Sunni Islamism that claims to emulate the lifestyle and religion of the pious ancestors (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ, or the first three generations of Muslims) (Wagemakers 2016).

Salafis have a common doctrine, but how they transform doctrine into a choice of strategy varies (Wiktorowicz 2008, 208). Most of the current Iraqi Kurdish Salafis (and most Salafis globally) are quietists, who disengage from oppositional party politics.⁵ Quietist Salafis refuse to create political parties and focus instead on education and preaching. They believe that rebellion against rulers would lead to more chaos and instability and would risk replacing one evil with an even greater evil (Bonney 2018, 195). This is the stance of the most respected scholars in Saudi Arabia, including Abdulaziz ibn Baz (1910–1999), former Great Mufti of the Kingdom, and Muhammad ibn al-'Uthaymin (1929–2001) (Lacroix 2011, 78; Mouline 2014, 178).

In this article, we consider quietist Salafis to be part of the broader field of Islamism. We see them as political when they take a position on controversial issues (for example, moral issues) in the political debate; they often take a strong stance on global politics (condemning Western occupation of Muslim land, for example); moreover, they often seek to advise political decision makers. We believe that supporting holders of political power is a political action, just as joining the opposition would be (Bonney 2008, 139; Makboul 2019).

The popular appeal of quietist Salafism has been on a steady rise in Kurdistan for many years now. The most famous scholar of them all is Dr. Abdullatif Salafi, a Salafi sheikh in Sulaimaniyah. Originally from Ranya in the north of the Sulaimaniyah governorate, and from a religious lineage, Abdullatif Salafi is an example of a scholar who does not question the legitimacy of the authorities (Abdullatif Salafi, interview, November 2018). Like other quietist Salafis, he preaches support for the Muslim ruler in place (for more on the apoliticism of quietist Salafis, see Meijer 2017; Bonney 2017).⁶ Abdullatif was therefore an effective government ally in the fight against Daesh, but also a government ally against the Islamist opposition parties in KRI.

Abdullatif owns a very popular TV station, Amozghary, established in 2013, as well as a mosque with a Qur'an school in the city of Sulaimaniyah. Abdullatif and the Islamist political parties in Kurdistan take opposite views on how to relate to the Kurdish authorities (JaJJalal 2019). Abdullatif is pro the government and the status quo, telling his followers not to protest, but instead to be more careful, patient and to preserve stability. In the same period that Abdullatif's popularity increased, Islamist political parties have witnessed a crisis in their popularity (Hadi Ali, interview, Head of the Leadership Council of KIU, March 2020). Through the rise of quietist Salafism, Kurdish Islamism is thus becoming increasingly aligned with the government.

The government's attempts at bureaucratising, co-opting and promoting Kurdish Islam: counter-measures to Daesh or political opportunism?

In general terms, we consider that the state (or de facto state) can intervene in the religious sphere and nationalise (here: Kurdicize) in at least three ways. First, a government can make an effort to control and regulate mosques, sermons and religious education through *bureaucratisation* and institutionalisation. Examples include the unified Friday sermon in many countries (including Egypt) or mandatory closure of mosques outside prayer times. Second, a state can *co-opt non-state religious personnel*, for example by employing former faith-based civil society actors. Waincott (2017, 11) distinguishes between these two, 'bureaucratization' of Islam and 'co-optation' of Islam. Bureaucratisation means

hierarchising religious specialists; co-optation, however, often aims at neutralising religious actors as political opponents. Third, the government makes efforts to *reshape the universal Islamic message to fit the country's national interests* (as perceived by the political power-holders). This may occur when the government calls on religious scholars to give religious support to controversial issues, such as the independence referendum in Kurdistan in 2017.

Bureaucratisation of Islam

Bureaucratisation of Islam by governments in the Middle East is a relatively new feature, given that during the de-centralised governance of the Ottoman Empire the religious sphere enjoyed relative autonomy on the condition that religious officials pronounced the Friday Prayer in the name of the Sultan (Hourani 2002, 136). When many Arab states obtained their independence in the 20th century, some of them (such as Tunisia and Egypt) began to imitate the European Westphalian model of bureaucratising religion (see, for example, Donker & Netterstrom 2017: 4–5).⁷ Yet, many regimes in the Middle East have been more focused on ‘neutralizing’ than on ‘bureaucratizing’ the religious sphere (Wainscott 2017, 11; see also Antoun 2006; Pierret 2013, 22).

After the rise of violent jihadism from 2001 onwards, and most particularly with the emergence of Daesh in 2014, political regimes in the Middle East from Morocco via Egypt and Turkey to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have made new efforts to centralise control over the religious field (uniformisation of the Friday sermon in Egypt since 2014 is one example, see Lacroix and Shalata 2018, 35), often following the Turkish example (Öztürk 2018).⁸ The threat coming from Daesh is frequently only a pretext to ‘upgrade authoritarianism’, control religious personnel and Islamic discourse and fight domestic enemies (Gade 2019). In Egypt, for example, the unified Friday sermon is at least partially directed against the Muslim Brotherhood (defined as a terrorist organisation by Sisi’s Egypt) (Gade and Fahmi 2020).

How about the Kurdish case? With the Daesh threat looming both inside and at the borders of KRI in 2014,⁹ Kurdistan introduced a number of countermeasures that also strengthened state control over Islamic discourse. These had high political priority, at least officially.¹⁰ One measure was Law number 5 (2015), which allowed all religions to freely practice their religious traditions in Kurdistan. Moreover, a series of restrictive measures were introduced. Mosques were more tightly regulated. Preachers were given the choice between three topics each week for the Friday sermon but were free to formulate their sermons as they wished. Radical Salafi books were removed from the Kurdistan Region, and certain TV and radio programmes were closed. The government also began to monitor more closely online jihadi content.

While responding to the rise of Daesh by reforming the curriculum of Islamic schools and of the religious studies curriculum in all primary and secondary schools, one of the new measures was to introduce Kurdish history and nationalism in the religious sciences courses. Importantly, the Endowment Office also added the subject of ‘Kurdiology’, which is now taught in all religious classes in all schools (Fuad Smail, interview, a member of the religious education reform committee of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, October 2018). This shows how the political authorities in Kurdistan direct their message about Kurdish Islam mainly to the Kurdish Islamic community, as a means to combine religion and nationalism.

These measures are aimed at preventing extremism and promoting coexistence between the various religious and ethnic components of Kurdistan (Mamakani 2016). Yet, this is also an attempt to nationalise Islam, making it more aligned to the aspirations of Kurdish nationalism and statehood, and to gain more sovereign control over the religious field.

Co-optation

The restrictive measures outlined above were accompanied by co-optation of non-state religious personnel by the ruling parties, for example employing Islamic intellectuals and academics. A number of former members of moderate Islamist movements have not only abandoned Islamism but also embraced the stance of the ruling KDP on Kurdish Islam. In this context, it is important to highlight that beneath the façade of Kurdistan's state-like institutions and KRG, the KDP and PUK maintain parallel systems of governance, each controlling economic resources, different branches of the security, military and intelligence apparatus, and parts of the administration. The religious sphere and institutions are also deeply controlled by these two parties in their zones of influence.

Thus, the Kurdish case also corresponds, to a great extent, to a growing government centralisation and control of religious discourse and citizens' religious practices in the region. The goal was not only to contain jihadism but also to serve the aspiration for Kurdish statehood by making uniform Kurdish culture and religion.

Kurdish Islam: Reshaping the universal message of Islam in light of government interests

The restrictive measures and co-optation were accompanied by the government's granting of more media space and visibility to new Islamic intellectuals proposing concrete alternatives to radical Islam, i.e., Kurdish Islam. We see Kurdish Islam as Kurdish religious nationalism that has come to supplement mainstream Kurdish nationalism, and which helps the Kurdish political authorities reach as many constituencies as possible. Kurdish Islam is, in other words, a discourse, and a narrative, promoted by the government vis-à-vis Islamic constituencies in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The idea that Kurdish Islam is different from Arab Islam and Turkish Islam first developed in the 1990s. During the war waged by the two secular/nationalist parties KDP and PUK against Kurdish Islamist parties in the 1990s, it became common among KDP and PUK politicians to use the term 'Kurdish Islam' to undermine the Kurdishness of the Islamist political parties, i.e. KIU, the Islamic Group and the Islamic Movement. According to one analyst, the politicians used it as a reaction to the religious revival that emerged in the Islamic world, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Tahsin Hama Gharib, interview, March 2020). They wanted to discredit Islamist parties by underscoring the idea that the experience of these groups was essentially based on Arabic culture and thus alien to Kurdish culture.

Politicians continued to use the term 'Kurdish Islam' throughout the years of development of state-like institutions in Kurdistan.¹¹ Seen by Kurdish authorities, Kurdish Islam is the antidote to militant extremism. The narrative of the Kurdish political establishment is this: the Kurdish ethnic cause acts as a barrier to Islamist extremism, which is (according to this narrative) so widespread among Iraqi Arabs.

We believe that the Kurdish Islam discourse is directed against the Kurdish Islamic community in particular (against the more zealous believers; not against the mainstream Kurdish public, who are already nationalist). In other words, the Kurdish political authorities maintain the same (nationalist) discourse vis-à-vis the general public. Moreover, they have recently added a discourse adapted to the Islamic community, using different registers at one and the same time (religious nationalist/Islamic, mainstream nationalist). Moreover, the Kurdish Islam discourse is also directed at Western capitals, in an attempt to portray Iraqi Kurdistan as a more liberal, open-minded society willing to ally with the West.

After Daesh emerged in 2014 in Iraq and Syria, the Kurdish Islam narrative was met with interest in Western capitals. KRG regularly highlights the moderate and tolerant nature of Kurdish Islam, i.e. how Islam is practiced in KRI. KRG portrays the region as a moderate oasis in contrast to an otherwise 'violent' and chaotic' Arab Iraq. The policy of promoting Kurdish Islam can also be explained within broader policies of de facto entities (or entities seeking recognition) as an effort to strengthen their shared identity and a new and distinct national identity (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008, 484; Caspersen 2012, 36–37). Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2008, 485) refer to this as an attempt by state leaders, intellectuals, and others to give an entity the qualities of a nation-state. Among the policies adopted by de facto state authorities are cultural and linguistic homogenisation (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2008; Rae 2009). What has been seriously under analysed and under conceptualised is the role of nationalising religion in this process. For example, in her study on nation-building and internal legitimacy in de facto states, Caspersen does not include the role of religion in both establishing internal legitimacy and diversifying support to the struggle for independence (Caspersen 2012, 2015).

Moreover, since 2014, a new generation of independent scholars whose agenda is aligned with the government has emerged, such as the author and theologian Tahsin Hama Gharib and the Islamic preacher on TV, Abdulrahman Saddiq. They, too, seek to reformulate Islam in light of Kurdish national interests. In the next section, we analyse their arguments against the backdrop of wider Kurdish and regional political developments.

National identity and Islam

The emergence of Daesh in 2014 led a group of Kurdish Islamic intellectuals in Iraq to turn more towards Kurdish nationalism, and revive Kurdish religious nationalism. These actors were not instigated top-down by the government, although the government may have facilitated their work through granting media visibility. The alliance with religious nationalists helped the Kurdistan government in Erbil multiply its registers, and use both secular nationalism and religious nationalism at the same time. Hence, it could reach as many constituencies as possible.

Revival of Kurdish religious nationalism

The term Kurdish Islam was long used only by the government to fight the Islamist opposition parties. The first intellectual to use the term 'Kurdish Islam' in 2003 was Tahsin Hama Gharib, a university professor in law and politics at the University of Human Development in Sulaimaniyah.

Gharib advocated that practices of Islam should be conducted in a way that serves the Kurdish struggle for independence. The ‘Kurdisation of Islam’ is, in his view, an integral part of consolidating the national identity of Kurdistan.¹² The soul and spirit of the Kurdish statehood project should be based on Kurdish Islam, combining religion and Kurdish culture (and the Kurdish aspiration for independence). This combination is termed ‘Kurdish Islam’ (Tahsin Hama Gharib, interview, March 2020).

Gharib considers that ‘[e]ach nation has its own experience with [Islam]. Kurdish Islam is about Kurdish historical experience with Islam, which is a different experience’ (Tahsin Hama Gharib, interview, March 2020). Gharib’s view is that the Kurds do not need to import the understanding of others, specifically Arabs, of Islam, as historically the Kurds have had their own Islamic thought, *madrasas* and practices, which (in his opinion) have emphasised peaceful coexistence.

Gharib, whose audience consists of Kurdish intellectuals and academics, characterises Kurdish Islam as having four ‘pillars’: Sufism and spirituality; philosophy; partnership and co-existence with the Kurdish authorities in place (i.e. Kurdish Islam is not political); and active individual participation, energy and passion. All four pillars are measured against his (simplified, some would say distorted) image of ‘Arab Islam’, as a political Islam in which individuals are allegedly passive, non-spiritual, less tolerant and mainly focus on complying with Islamic law (Shari’a) (Tahsin Hama Gharib, interview, March 2020).

Gharib’s view of Kurdish Islam is arguably more about reformulating nationalism than Islam. He argues that Kurdish intellectuals have thus far followed the European example and not taken into account the deeper dimension of the community, rendering it superficial. For instance, they do not care about the spiritual dimension of Kurdish poetry. Yet, for the Kurdish ‘experience to work, it has to have a spiritual component’ (Tahsin Hama Gharib, interview, March 2020). In Gharib’s opinion, Kurdish Islam should be ‘a springboard to revive the modern concept of nationalism’ (Tahsin Hama Gharib, interview, March 2020).

Kurdish Islam in the TV show ‘Islam in Kurdish’

Another voice in the current debate about Islam and Kurdishness in Iraqi Kurdistan is Abdulrahman Saddiq, an Islamic intellectual, who hosts a weekly TV show on ‘Islam in Kurdish’ on the *Kurdistan24* channel. *Kurdistan24* is a channel close to Masrour Barzani, current PM of KRI from the ruling party of KDP. Since 2010 Saddiq has also written a bi-weekly column in the KDP-supported *Gullan Magazine* and website, addressing similar topics to those in his Kurdish Islam show.

Abdulrahman Saddiq is a former Minister of Environment (2003–2004) with KIU. He has recently been appointed as the Head of KRG’s Environment Conservation and Improvement Board. He is also a former senior member of KIU, but famously left in 2009 (Abdulrahman Saddiq, interview, October 2018).

The show, which started in 2015, is part of a larger and new intellectual effort to explain and promote Kurdish Islam, i.e. how the Kurds should understand religion. Saddiq’s is a less intellectual audience than Gharib’s. But like Gharib, Saddiq promotes the idea that the practice of Islam can be localised based on the traditions, cultures, experiences and realities of each society. The programme tries to provide a Kurdish reading and

understanding of the religious texts. It is an attempt to stop importing Arab ('alien') identity and thoughts. Instead, it tries to promote Kurdish local thoughts on religion in 'Kurdistan' with 'our language, in our time, for the sake of Kurdish independence and statehood'.¹³

In one programme, for example, Saddiq discussed *Nowroz*, the popular Kurdish and Persian new year holiday.¹⁴ In the mainstream Islamic tradition, the only holidays to celebrate are *Eid Adha* and *Eid Fitr*. However, for many Kurds, *Nowroz* is as popular as the Islamic Eids. Islamist parties also celebrate *Nowroz*, but Salafis reject it. Saddiq tries to respond to Salafi criticism, arguing that *Nowroz* is a Kurdish *jazhn* (Eid) and tradition, and that people need to accept Kurdish tradition even if it does not match some interpretations of Islam. This is a clear demonstration of Kurdish Islam's opposition to Salafism.

Islamist reactions to Kurdish Islam

The Islamist parties and the Salafis all refused Kurdish Islam rhetoric, and were targets of this rhetoric.

Islamists responded to the Kurdish Islam discourse by arguing that Islam cannot be nationalised (Hadi Ali, interview, March 2020; Muthanna Amin, interview, head of KIU bloc in Iraqi parliament, March 2020). According to a representative of the Kurdistan Islamic Movement we interviewed: 'As the Kurdistan Islamic Movement, we completely disagree about using this *terminology*' (Kurdish Islam) (Abdullah Warti, interview, the Islamic Movement spokesperson, October 2018).

Kurdish Islamist groups face the dilemma of having to relate to nationalism and Islamism simultaneously. Kurdish Islamists must in fact also use Kurdish nationalist symbols, in order to gain popular support in their constituencies. KIU, for example, strongly supports the Kurdish struggle for independence. There are three main explanations of the endorsement of Kurdish nationalism by Kurdish Islamic parties, including KIU with an Ikhwani background. First, Islamist parties reject the 'artificial' borders of the states that Kurds are forced to live in. Second, Kurdish Islamists, including Salafis, now believe that the nation-state is not against Islam (see Mustafa 2021; Jalal and Ahram 2021). Third, as mentioned above, Kurds define their issue in Iraq and the region as an ethnic issue, and religion as a tool used by Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq against Kurdish rights. This decreases the space for Islamism.

Moreover, some former members of KIU have become key ideological protagonists of Kurdish Islam (the Kurdish religious nationalism promoted by the government).¹⁵ However, most members and spokespersons of KIU refuse the discourse about Kurdish Islam as mistaken¹⁶; some also call it 'chauvinistic' ('demeans other nations', 'considers itself superior to others', anti-Arab and anti-Turkish) and 'un-scientific' (Muthanna Amin, interview, March 2020).

There are risks associated with embracing the term 'Kurdish Islam'; it might be interpreted as deviating from Islam. In his speech during the party's eighth Congress in December 2019, Salahaddin Mohammad Bahauddin, the Secretary General of KIU, said, 'For us, there are no titles of Kurdish Islam or Arabic Islam. This is a huge heresy (*bid'ah*). There is only one Islam: the Islam of Allah. Titles of "liberal Islam", "socialist Islam" or "democratic Islam" do not exist for us.'¹⁷

Importantly, despite refusing the term ‘Kurdish Islam’ (and attributing it directly to the two figures of Tahsin Hama Gharib and Abdulrahman Saddiq), many in KIU do agree that Kurds in Iraq have a particular practice of Islam that differs from an ‘Arab practice’. We (the authors) call this agreement on the *content* of Kurdish Islam and on the importance of Kurdish experience and interaction. Moreover, most members of KIU emphasised the specificity of Kurdish culture in their interviews with us (for example: Fatih Mohamed, interview, scholar, November 2018; Abdulkarim Ahmed, director of Speda TV, KIU’s TV channel, interview, March 2020). ‘The Islamic political parties and Islamic figures should adopt an approach that befits the environment. You could call this Kurdish Islam [...] Kurds should not imitate clothing, architecture and colours of Muslims in other countries’ (Fatih Mohamed, interview, November 2018).

Speda TV has programmes about Kurdish culture, traditions, and poetry. In one show, called Arif’s House (‘Arif’ in Islam and Arabic refers to ‘wise and experienced scholars’), they read Kurdish poetry, Sufi thoughts and songs. Another is ‘Kurds in Islamic Civilisation’. The director of the movement’s TV station, said to us in an interview:

This terminology (of Kurdish Islam) is based on the fact that when any religion spreads in any environment, it will take in some of the local context [...] In Kurdistan, you will see that the way people practice Islam here is quite different to the way the Saudis practice Islam, for example. This has a major influence on KIU which [...] is also distinctive in that it has a more pronounced Kurdish identity.

Kurdish Salafis do have some awareness about maintaining Kurdish culture. Salafis across the world are known to make culture uniform and to imitate what they believe were the practices and customs at the time of the prophet Mohammed and his companions. While Arab Salafis distinguish themselves in their societies by wearing Saudi clothing, Kurdish Salafis like Abdullatif Salafi blend into their national habitat by wearing Kurdish traditional clothes. This shows that even representatives of Kurdish Salafism need to give some concessions to Kurdish culture in order to keep their followers. Yet, among all the Islamist leaders we met during our fieldwork, Abdullatif Salafi, the famous quietist Salafi in Sulaimaniyah, had the most critical view of the idea of Kurdish Islam. In an interview conducted in November 2018, he said:

Those who want to introduce fissures *have their own plans*. They want to dispossess Islam of its content and its meaning. They only focus on some superficial matters and they say this is what Islam. (Abdullatif Salafi, interview, November 2018)

Moreover, he said:

Islam is Islam. Is there any difference between Kurdish and Norwegian fasting? There is no difference. The difference is the way we dress. There are differences in customs and traditions. (Moreover,) Kurds explain Islam in Kurdish and Arabs in Arabic. But Islam is one thing.’ (Abdullatif Salafi, interview, November 2018).

Abdullatif’s opponents accuse him of not being ‘Kurdish enough’. Muthanna Amin, the KIU MP from Abdullatif’s hometown of Sulaimaniyah, echoed a widespread belief when he argued (in an interview with the authors in 2020): ‘Salafis do not represent Kurdish culture. They represent a part of Saudi culture that is called Almadkhalia, known formerly as Aljamia.¹⁸ They represent this culture and they have no link to the Kurds except for their language and clothes’ (Muthanna Amin, interview, March 2020).

The accusation of not being nationalist or Kurdish enough, or plainly being a traitor to the nationalist cause, is also launched against radical Salafis. The main Kurdish criticism of Mullah Krekar, the radical Kurdish Islamist long based in Norway until he was extradited to Italy in March 2020, has been that he did not contribute to the Kurdish cause. Krekar has recently been forced to show that he supports the Kurdish right to statehood.

In some of his videos, Krekar speaks about the Kurdish issue and statehood. However, he does this while maintaining his support for radical global Islam, and exhibits conflicting identities. In videos posted on *YouTube*, the video-sharing platform, in 2020, he published political and nationalistic statements on one day and jihadi statements on the next. The reason for Krekar's ideological volatility appears to be populism: he wants to mobilise as many as possible, and his popularity in Iraqi Kurdistan rose between 2017 and 2019, specifically among youths opposed to the traditional Kurdish elites.

Although it might seem paradoxical that Krekar as a global Islamist felt obliged to acknowledge Kurdish nationalism, this points to our argument about there being an overlap between nationalist and Islamist constituencies in Iraqi Kurdistan. Krekar is not only known in Iraqi Kurdistan because of his Islamist stances; he is also respected because of his excellent command of Kurdish and Arabic, and for being a very eloquent speaker (Muthanna Amin, interview, March 2020). Thus, he has popularity beyond the small circle of global Islamists in Kurdistan. Krekar's attempt to address the Kurdish issue and statehood illustrates that he does his best to reach a broader audience in Kurdistan and that he knows that to do so, he must address the topics that matter the most to Iraqi Kurds, i.e. Kurdish statehood. As mentioned above, it is not possible to gain broad popular support if you do not believe in the Kurdish right to statehood, specifically in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Thus, to sum up, we see that almost all Kurdish Islamists, including Islamist parties and Salafis, refuse the Kurdish government's idea of Kurdish Islam representing a special school of thought of Islam. Yet, most of them relate somehow to Kurdish nationalism and exhibit some attachment to Kurdish traditional customs and folklore.

Conclusion

This paper shows that nationalism and Islamism have been hybridised since 2014 because of new political pressures in the religious field after Daesh. It answered two interlinked questions: 1) how do Kurdish Islamists navigate the dilemma of having to relate to Islamism and nationalism at the same time? 2) Why have Kurdish authorities in Iraq since 2014 taken steps to centralise control over religious activities? The paper answers these questions by showing that Kurdish Islamists, even Salafis, must relate to Kurdish nationalism to maintain their followers. They do so out of pragmatism and for popular support but also because they believe in the Kurdish cause, which is defined by the Kurdish desire for a Kurdish nation-state. Islamists may refuse the idea of a specific 'Kurdish Islam', but they believe in the specificity of Kurdish culture and identity, they are proud to be Kurds, supporting Kurdish statehood.

Kurdish political authorities increasingly intervene in the religious field, through *bureaucratising* Islam, *co-opting* Islamic figures and by *promoting a version of Islam that they believe fits their political interests*. In recent years, Kurdish authorities in Iraq have proposed what they call 'Kurdish Islam' as an alternative to radical Islamism. 'Kurdish

Islam' is a type of Kurdish religious nationalism. It is not a substitute for Kurdish mainstream nationalism, but co-exists with it. The 'Kurdish Islam' discourse is directed by the authorities at the Kurdish Islamist parties, in an attempt to make them more nationalist.

The paper also shows that while Kurdish authorities made the first use of the term Kurdish Islam, it has in recent years been extended to independent scholars and intellectuals. These are not supported by the government, but the government gives them visibility and public endorsement. However, many Kurdish Islamists staunchly refuse the terminology of Kurdish Islam.

The Kurdish authorities do not seem to be moving towards religious nationalism in the sense of advocating Kurdish Islam; it is only the Kurdish religious clerics and the representatives of the Endowment that speak of Kurdish Islam. Yet, the authorities have implemented reforms and institutionalised the official religious sector so as to gain stronger control and homogenise religious expression in Kurdistan. This is done in the context of the struggle against the threat of Daesh, but it also gives the extra bonus of weakening the power of Islamist opposition parties, and of reaching out to new audiences with a nationalist discourse. In this sense, the nationalisation of Islam is absolutely an aspect of state-building, yet the religious language is an aspect that does not appeal to all Kurds, many of whom refuse the link between religion and the Kurdish political cause.

What does this say about the development of de facto state-building in Kurdistan? Reconciliation between secular power holders and moderate Islamists seems to be one of the effects of the Kurdish Islam discourse. This is a tendency that has long been brewing, and which might have led to the weakening of the popularity of the Kurdish Islamic parties. The joker in the pack is the quietist Salafi tendency and its relationship to political power. Many Kurds fear that although the current Salafi movement is quietist, it might organise a political party should the movement continue to gain in popularity. If so, the constraint of having to relate to Kurdish nationalism might both gain the support of the government and weaken it, as the Salafis oppose the idea of Kurdish Islam.

The findings and analyses of this article have the potential to contribute to the literature on state- and nation-building in de facto states or entities that seek de jure independence, and how the leaders and intellectuals of these entities try to align the dominant religion of the population with ethnic and nationalist interests. Through the case of Kurdistan, this paper explores the underappreciated role of the nationalisation of religion in the development and process of both state- and nation-building in de facto independent entities. The idea of Kurdish Islam as the spirit of state-building is in line with the attempts of the de facto state authorities trying to separate themselves from their parent (or base) states (Caspersen 2012; Richards and Smith 2015).

Notes

1. For similar discussions on the Turkish case, see: Özdalga (2006); Uğur (2004); Erturk (2020).
2. We distinguish between the history of Kurdish Islamic thought and the history of Kurdish Islamist organisations.
3. In the late 1980s, they were part of the armed struggle against Saddam. At that time 'jihad' meant fighting Saddam. After 1990s, they maintained 'jihad' but without making it specific to any group. Other extremist groups, such as Krekar's group, believed in jihad against the KDP-PUK rule.

4. Moderate in this context means that the Islamist parties do not believe in armed struggle; instead, they pursue political and civil mechanisms to enhance their interest and power.
5. Other forms of Salafism are constituted by *haraki* Salafis, who engage in parliamentary politics or petitions, organisations, demonstrations; and by the Salafi jihadis, who believe in individual, non-defensive jihad. See (Maher 2017; Bonnefoy 2017) in Cavatorta and Merone 2017: 208; (Meijer 2017) in Cavatorta and Merone 2017: 220 and (Utvik 2014, 10).
6. Two famous quietist Salafi scholars in the Kurdistan region before Dr Abdullatif include the late sheikhs Hamdi Abulajeed al-Salafi in Sarang and Ali Nabi in Duhok.
7. We are grateful to Olivier Roy for this analysis.
8. For earlier efforts, see for example Zeghal 2002.
9. 550 Iraqi Kurds are known to have travelled to join Daesh in 2014 and 2015 and at least 150 returned to Kurdistan. In addition, more than 800 Kurds were arrested by the Kurdish security forces before they were able to join the group (anonymous, interview with Erbil security official, December 2019). Moreover, Kurdish jihadi networks in the European diaspora and Turkey are known to play an active role in radicalising Iraqi Kurds to jihad (anonymous, interview with Erbil security official, December 2019).
10. For instance, a high-level conference on religious rhetoric was convened under the supervision of the former Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani.
11. The KPD-PUK Unification 2005 agreement allowed the Kurdish de facto state to unify and nationalise the existing institutions, including religious institutions (Palani et al. 2021, 411).
12. Insights from Salahaddin University's Workshop on Combatting Violent Extremism. (6 August 2019).
13. Authors' observation of TV programme, 25 December 2015. Available at <https://www.kurdistan24.net/so/program/d15fbee7-7d3e-4e3c-ba29-93f129ac344f>
14. Authors' observation of TV programme, 18 March 2016. Available at <https://www.kurdistan24.net/so/program/37871756-6873-4118-b203-31127ef14e8a>
15. Abubakir Karwani, for example, a senior member of the party and rival for the leadership, promotes the idea of Kurdish Islam.
16. Hadi Ali, Head of the Leadership Council of KIU, for example, downplayed the importance of the Kurdish Islam tendency as coming from 'individuals', 'very limited and it is not correct'. Interview, March 2020.
17. Statements of Salahaddin Mohammad Bahauddin, the Secretary General of KIU, during the party's eighth Congress in December 2019. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olJ8LsFzcEk>
18. Saudi Arabia's Sheikh Rabi' al-Madkhali belongs to a current of thought that was supported by the Kingdom in the 1990s against the Ikhwan-inspired Sahwa Movement (Lacroix 2011, 212). He distinguishes himself by his anti-political stance and his insistence on the need to support the ruler (*wali' al-amir*) to avoid chaos.

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