



Dirasat

Kurdish Islamists in Iraq from the Muslim Brotherhood to the So-Called Islamic State: Continuity or Departure?

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Abstract

The major Islamist groups in the Kurdistan region of Iraq have long been part of the political landscape both at the subnational Kurdi- stan level and at the Iraqi national level. They gradually emerged in the late 1980s and became more visible and pronounced as a result of the atrocities inflicted on the Kurdish people under Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. Subsequently the Kurdish Islamist groups became a fixture on the formal Kurdish political stage in 1991 after the popular Kurdish uprising in the spring of that year. The Islamists have so far not become a major determining factor in Kurdish politics, yet they are nonetheless significant and effective. In the mid-1990s they became for a short while a vehicle for protest votes against the two major Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). A major contributing factor to their relative unpopularity is the religious association of most Iraqi Kurds with Sunni Islam, since most Kurds are Muslims and the official Iraqi national religion is Islam; the Kurdish liberation movement was a nationalist one and not a struggle to achieve sectarian or religious rights, as the Kurds had no grievances at the religious or sectarian levels.

This being said, the Kurdish Islamic parties enjoy a sizable following, having participated in all democratic elections since May 1992. However, the relatively open political sphere created an atmosphere in which also other Islamist tendencies could thrive and expand. This meant that certain radical Islamic groups evolved or emerged as splinter groups from the already visible and active

political Islamist organizations in consequence of people's dissatisfaction and disaffection with the existing Islamist Kurdish groups. This paper discusses why this occurred. It also argues that there is a clear link between the Islamist anti-US insurgency that emerged after the regime of Saddam Hussein was overthrown and the Islamist groups and orientations inside Kurdistan, although the study by no means asserts that the anti-US insurgency was primarily a Kurdish Islamist one; rather, Kurdish Islamism represents a fraction of the radical jihadist movement that has swept the Middle East since June 2014. The paper also argues that the so-called ISIS evolved from the anti-US insurgency and has a small Kurdish contingency, and it explains the reasons behind this phenomenon.

The paper traces the roots of the Islamist groups in Kurdistan to the Egyptian-founded Muslim Brotherhood movement established in 1928. It describes their associations with and attraction to this organization and their eventual disillusionment, disappointment, and departure as a consequence of the lack of MB solidarity with Kurdish suffering, and it elucidates their overlapping religious and Kurdish nationalist loyalties. This paper also describes why certain Kurdish individuals joined the radical organization known as ISIS, what their motivations were, and how they arrived at their decision. The study concludes by analyzing the reasons behind the rise of ISIS and its potential decline.

Introduction

It seems like a reasonable question to ask – why are there Kurdish jihadists within the ranks of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS)? What is the impetus behind this trend? And what is the position of local Islamist political parties on the rise and emergence of ISIS? The mainstream and politically active Kurdish Islamist political parties have always had schizophrenic tendencies when articulating their political aspirations and ideological inclinations. On the one hand, they have subscribed to strict Islamic values, challenging nationalist and secular Kurdish parties' notion of an anti-Islamist, aggressively secular, and Westernized Kurdistan region. On the other hand, however, they have embraced the Kurdish nationalist project wholeheartedly and have been a major component of Kurdi-stan's turbulent and at times dysfunctional political landscape. To answer this question, then, a descriptive and analytical historical narrative of the roots, rise, and emergence of Kurdish Islamist parties is necessary, as the events of the summer of 2014, culminating in the ascendancy of a radical jihadist group such as ISIS in the Middle East, are all heavily interlinked.

After the 1991 Kurdish uprising, the only visible major Islamist group was the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK), which enjoyed a relatively large following. After the May 1992 parliamentary elections in the Kurdistan region – the very first in Kurdish history – the Kurdish Islamists were able to secure the third-largest share of the popular vote (5.1%). Ironically, to their and the Kurdistan region's peril, this was not enough to guarantee a single seat in the Kurdistan parliament, as the parliamentary entry threshold was 7%. This clause was arguably the beginning and the primary cause of continuous unrest and instability in the Kurdistan region, and

it served as the trigger for the civil war that eventually erupted and raged on until 1998, engulfing an already impoverished, unstable, and fragmented region. Concurrent with the parliamentary general elections the ballot paper included a presidential race, whose results (see table 1) demonstrate the existence of deep divisions in the Kurdish political spectrum, with Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz (general leader of the IMK) again scoring the third-highest number of votes after the prominent Kurdish leaders Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani.

Table 1: Results of Kurdistan region's 1992 presidential elections.¹

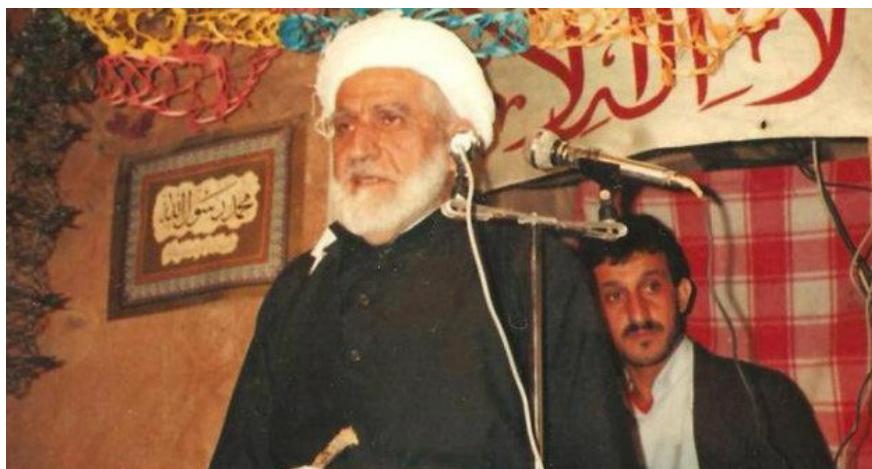
Candidate	Votes cast	Percentage
Masoud Barzani (KDP)	466,819	47.51
Jalal Talabani (PUK)	441,507	44.93
Othman Abdul-Aziz (IMK)	38,965	3.97
Mahmoud Othman (KSP)	23,309	2.37
Total	970,600	100

Had the Islamists won several seats in parliament (at least five), this might have possibly prevented the creation of the deadly, artificial, and controversial 50/50 division of the unity government between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a division that excluded all other, smaller Kurdish parties from government and led to a protracted civil war between the two parties that started on May 1, 1994. Had the Kurdish Islamists and other political groups been part of the Kurdistan Parliament and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in a broad-based coalition government, essentially integrated into Kurdistan's political landscape and governmental process, the

1- Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 130.

all-out civil war between the PUK and the KDP could likely have been averted. The inclusion of the smaller parties would thus have prevented the start of a prolonged fratricidal war that did not end until the Clinton Administration became heavily involved, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright investing much time and energy in the process and personally overseeing the signing of a peace treaty between the KDP's Masoud Barzani and the PUK's Jalal Talabani in Washington in September 1998.

In December 1993 the IMK leader Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz was captured and paraded on television; one of his sons was killed, his headquarters in Betwata were totally destroyed, and another of his sons, with his beard shaven, was also paraded on television after intense fighting with the leftist-oriented and secular PUK. It was this initial unfortunate bloodshed and the consequent bad blood that arguably partly explain the inherited, heavily entrenched, deep-rooted, and unforgotten hatred harbored by various individuals and ideological factions within the later expanding and diversifying Kurdish Islamist groups active in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.



Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz - Source: <http://goo.gl/RTIjWl>

There are also direct and indirect links between the anti-US insurgency in Iraq post-2003 and the Kurdish Islamist groups; these links are significant and relevant to this study. More importantly, there is a direct link between the anti-US insurgency and ISIS. Moreover, the historical roots of the Islamist groups in Kurdistan cannot be simply traced back to the 1991 popular Kurdish uprising against the Baath regime. They originate much earlier, and without sufficient understanding of the pre-1991 era the argument presented would be deficient and immature. For the purpose of this study, it makes sense to begin by examining the roots of the Kurdish Islamist groups now active in the Kurdistan region, how they evolved into what they are now, and what links they may have had with the emergence of a radical organization such as ISIS.

Kurdish Islamist Parties and the So-Called Islamic State

To put it mildly, the major Islamist political parties in Kurdistan find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Both of the current major Kurdish Islamist parties with ministers in the government and parliamentary seats, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and the Islamic Group of Kurdistan (IGK), have been the subject of criticism by the Kurdish people as well as the other, secular political groups for their lack of clarity on Islamic fundamentalism, especially after the military victories of ISIS over the peshmerga; ISIS captured huge swathes of Kurdish-administered Iraqi Kurdistan in August 2014 in the aftermath of the group's incursions into Kurdish-controlled, Yazidi-inhabited territory. The Kurdish Islamists have failed to present a clear, coherent, and – more importantly – satisfying response with regard to their position on ISIS's invasion of Kurdistan, its massacres of Yazidi Kurds, and its kidnapping, enslaving, and then selling of Yazidi women and girls as the “fruits” or “spoils” of Holy

War (*jihad*), a move justified by ISIS's so-called Islamic conquests, known in Islamic terminology as *futuhat* (opening or liberation of un-Islamic territory). Ali Bapir, the leader (*amir*) of the IGK, has been challenged on numerous occasions in the Kurdish media with regard to his position and opinion on ISIS. He has constantly provided weak, incoherent, and occasionally messy theological explanations on this subject, claiming that ISIS's behavior is not strictly un-Islamic or outside the realm of Islam, as many embarrassed and politically correct Muslims wish to argue. Bapir's reluctance to express categorical rejection of ISIS can also be construed as evidence that the Kurdish Islamists are not totally out of sync with their methods of thinking concerning jihadism, Islamic rule, and the perceived suppression of the Muslim people.



Ali Bapir, *amir* of IGK - Source: <http://goo.gl/3uMeO4>

ISIS currently works on three fronts at the military jihadi level. The

first of these encompasses the liberation of Islamic lands and of subjugated Muslims (i.e., Sunnis) from Shi'ite rule (they characterize the Shi'a as *rawafid*, i.e., people who reject legitimate Islamic authority). The second front focuses on the liberation of Islamic lands from the grasp of heretics – in other words, secular, non-practicing Muslim rulers such as the Kurds. Al-Qaeda's Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's declassified letter (see below) confirms this line of jihadist thinking. Finally, the third front is aimed at the conversion of non-Muslims, whether Christians or Yazidis, to Islam, at the capture of their lands, and at their subjection to the jurisdiction of an Islamic caliphate.

On the Shi'a, al-Zarqawi argues in his letter:

These in our opinion are the key to change. I mean that targeting and hitting them in [their] religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies and bare the teeth of the hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans. Despite their weakness and fragmentation, the Sunnis are the sharpest blades, the most determined, and the most loyal when they meet those Batinis (Shi'a), who are a people of treachery and cowardice.²

2- Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "Zarqawi Letter" (2004), US Department of State Archive, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm> (accessed on December 20, 2014).

His statement on the Kurds is also telling:

These are a lump [in the throat] and a thorn whose time to be clipped has yet to come. They are last on the list, even though we are making efforts to harm some of their symbolic figures, God willing. These [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. They (the Jews) infiltrate through their lands, drape themselves in their banners, and take them as a bridge over which to cross for financial control and economic hegemony, as well as for the espionage base for which they have built a large structure the length and breadth of that land. In general, Islam's voice has died out among them – the Kurds – and the glimmer of religion has weakened in their homes.³

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Beginnings of Islamism in Kurdistan

Since their embrace of Islam in the seventh century AD, during the Arab-Islamic conquests, the Kurds have been known as devout Muslims adhering to all Islamic teachings, including jihad. Prominent jihadist leaders have emerged from among the Kurds, the most distinguished being Salahaddin Ayyubi in the twelfth century – a statesman, a military leader, and the liberator of Jerusalem from the Crusaders. However, Kurdish association with Islam goes back much further to the early days of the Prophet Mohammed, when a Kurd by the name of Kaban al-Kurdi emerged among the Prophet's disciples (*sahaba*), a fact that is well documented in Islamic history. However, for Kurdistan and the Kurds Islam as a faith is not coterminous

3- Ibid.

with political Islam. The very first introduction of political Islam to Iraq and Kurdistan came through the influence of a leading Sunni Arab Islamic cleric by the name of Sheikh Mohammed Mahmoud al-Sawaf.



Sheikh Mohammed Mahmoud al-Sawaf

Source: Arabic Wikipedia entry on Mohammed Mahmoud al-Sawaf (accessed May 16, 2015).

In 1946 Sheikh al-Sawaf returned to Iraq from Egypt after spending several years as a student of Islamic studies at the famous al-Azhar University in Cairo, during which time he had been introduced and subsequently drawn to the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) interpretation of Islam as an ideology of political activism appropriate for the twentieth century. While studying in Egypt, al-Sawaf had met the Egyptian MB founder Hassan al-Banna, who convinced him to found an Iraqi branch of the organization. After al-Sawaf returned to

Baghdad, he became a lecturer at the Faculty of Shari'a in Baghdad, preferring academic teaching over the judiciary as a career. This choice was demonstrative of his desire to recruit and preach among the student population. The Muslim Brotherhood movement entered the Iraqi political stage in 1946, initially in the form of a society called the "Society for the ordering of acknowledged virtues and the forbidding of sin" (Jam'iyyat Amr bi-l-Ma'ruf wa-l-Nahy 'an al-Munkar) under the leadership of al-Sawaf. It was modeled after the original MB of Egypt (which had been founded in 1928). Subsequently, in 1948 al-Sawaf, together with another supportive leading Iraqi scholar, Sheikh Amjad al-Zahawi, established the Islamic Brotherhood Society (Jam'iyyat al-Ukhawa al-Islamiyya). The society published a magazine entitled *The Islamic Brotherhood (Al-Ukhawa al-Islamiyya)*, which was discontinued after only two years when the monarchical government ordered that it, as well as the society itself, be shut down.⁴

It was not until the July 14, 1958, revolution that toppled the pro-British monarchy and established the Iraqi republic that the political environment changed in Iraq. The MB soon after declared itself the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). It was founded officially in April 1960 after the temporary opening of the political sphere as a result of the 1958 revolution. Dr. Abdul-Karim Zaydan was chosen as its leader after Sheikh al-Sawaf was forced into exile in 1959, when the MB felt his life was in danger given the communist ascendancy in Iraq. However, shortly afterward, in 1961, the IIP was banned from the Iraqi political landscape under nationalist military rule,

4- Mohammed Mahmoud al-Sawaf, *Al-'Allama al-Mujahid al-Shaykh Amjad al-Zahawi* (Cairo: Dar al-I'tisam, 1988), 18; Mohammed al-Majdhub, *'Ulama' wa-Mufakkirin Araf-tuhum*, 4th ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Sharq, 1992), 2:300.

which pushed the party underground, a situation that continued throughout the reign of the Baath Party right up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. At that point it reemerged as a potent and effective force on the Iraqi political scene. Today, the Iraqi Islamic Party is the largest Sunni Islamist political party in Iraq.

During the emergence and rise of the Iraqi MB, Kurdistan's concerns were different. Although the leaders of the Kurdish liberation movement throughout greater Kurdistan from the early twentieth century on had traditionally been prominent religious personalities, including Sheikh Saeed Piran, Qazi Mohammed, Sheikh Mahmoud Barzinji, Sheikh Abdul-Salam Barzani, Sheikh Ahmed Barzani, and Mullah Mustafa Barzani, none of them were Islamists.



Mullah Mustafa Barzani - Source: <https://goo.gl/zHFGev>

While these Kurdish leaders fused religious and nationalist

loyalties, their Kurdish identity was never perceived as inferior to their Islamic faith, nor was the priority of this nationalist sentiment questioned, especially after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I and the administration of Mesopotamia under British mandate. The Kurdish nationalist cause had been alive and well since 1919, initially led against the British by the religious figure Sheikh Mahmoud Barzinji who was a descendant (*hafid zada*) of the Prophet Mohammed and a member of an influential and prominent family of the Qadiri Sufi order. And although most Kurdish uprisings took place under the leadership of these religious figures, the movements were always nationalist, not religious or Islamic, in nature. Their sole objective was to gain self-determination, enshrined in ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and political rights that had been denied the Kurds after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire; they were not motivated by a yearning for the implementation of Islamic values. This focus was partly due to most Kurds' sharing of the Sunni Islamic faith with the government in Baghdad and thus the lack of a sense of discrimination or suppression of the Kurdish people on religious or sectarian grounds. Moreover, the religious pluralism of Iraqi Kurdistan, with its population of Christians, Jews (until the early 1950s), Sunnis, Shi'ites, Yazidis, Kakayis, and a plethora of Sufi orders, also partly explains the lack of enthusiasm for the creation of Islamist groups in the area: the Kurds' struggle was ethnic, not religious. Additionally, this religious pluralism led many Kurds and Kurdish scholars, both secular and religious, to declare Iraqi Kurdistan infertile ground for conservative political Islam.⁵ The

5- David Romano, "An Outline of Kurdish Islamist Groups in Iraq" (occasional paper, Jamestown Foundation, September 2007), 7.

more contemporary Kurdish nationalists have also been aggressively secular, insisting on the absence of political space for Kurdish Islamists. Moreover, many Kurdish nationalists are extremely critical of Islamic politics, feeling that the opponents of the Kurds – whether Arab, Turkish, or Persian – have traditionally used Islam to oppress and trick the Kurds and to stymie their national ambitions. As a result, Islamic parties have never been particularly popular as a political movement among Iraq's Kurds, and Islamist politics never attracted the level of support in Iraqi Kurdistan that Kurdish nationalist parties did. The Islamic parties' popularity peaked temporarily during the mid-1990s, when they were seen as a tool to protest against the highly inefficient and corrupt ruling secular Kurdish political parties, which were fighting each other at the time.⁶ From the 1940s onward a large proportion of the Kurdish intelligentsia was of a leftist inclination, heavily influenced by communist, Maoist, and Marxist ideology, and therefore rejected any form of Islamism. However, this state of affairs did not sit well with or satisfy Kurdish nationalists with Islamic tendencies – i.e., Kurdish Islamists – who at one point declared that there was “no difference between black and white dogs,” that is, between the Iraqi communists and the secular Kurdish parties.⁷

In 1954 Sheikh Mohammed Mahmoud al-Sawaf and Sheikh Amjad al-Zahawi visited the town of Halabja from Baghdad in order to introduce the Islamic Brotherhood – the first attempt in Kurdish history to introduce political Islam to Kurdistan. They were met at the Pasha Mosque and were received warmly by several distinguished

6- Ibid.

7- Kurdish intellectual (anonymity requested), telephone interview with author, March 10, 2015.

Kurdish scholars, including Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz, Mullah Salihi Gawra, Mullah Omar Abdul-Aziz, and Sheikh Jameel Mufti. Al-Sawaf and al-Zahawi managed to establish a relationship with Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz and the other respected scholars. Shortly thereafter, in the same year, another MB delegation visited Halabja, this time consisting of Subhi Dawudayi and Abideen Rasheed from Kirkuk; they were met by Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz, Mullah Jalal (son of Mullah Salihi Gawra), and Omar Reshawi. This was the beginning of political Islam in Kurdistan.⁸

Mullah Othman was a well-known and respected scholar in Halabja, the Shahrazoor Plain, and the broader Sulaimani Province. He was attracted to MB ideology mostly because of his appreciation for the link between governance and Islam, and he subsequently disseminated Islamic Brotherhood ideas among his followers and loyal students. Thereafter, it was scholars such as Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz, his brothers Mullah Ali Abdul-Aziz and Mullah Siddiq Abdul-Aziz, Mullah Mohammed Bahā'addin, Abdul-Aziz Parazani, and Omar Reshawi who spearheaded the MB and political Islam in Kurdistan.⁹

The Emergence of Indigenous Kurdish Islamist Groups

From the late 1980s onward, Kurdish religious nationalist movements became more visible, gradually emerging as significant actors on the Kurdish political stage albeit initially discreetly because of Saddam Hussein's intolerance of any form of political activity beyond the Baath Party. Before 1980, the Islamist trend in Kurdistan had little visible presence and was embodied primarily in the MB. It was the collapse

8- Mohammed Salih Hawrami, telephone interview with author, February 20, 2015.

9- Ibid.

of the Kurdish revolt in 1975 and the death of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the president of the KDP and the overarching national leader of the Kurdish liberation movement, in 1979 that allowed the diversification of the Kurdish political landscape into various political parties. Furthermore, the rise of Islamist groups also reflected other events, especially the Islamic-dominated revolution in Iran in 1979 and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. Political Islam in Kurdistan grew slowly into an effective and potent force with patronage from the Islamic Republic of Iran. With the start of the war in 1980, Iran began to encourage, establish, and arm Islamist groups in both Arab Iraq and Kurdistan to support their own objective of toppling and weakening Saddam's regime. It is worth noting, however, that Iranian support was not exclusive to Kurdish Islamists: the other, secular Kurdish parties enjoyed the same favorable treatment.

Mullah Othman was initially an imam at the Shafi'i Mosque in Halabja as well as a lecturer at and the director of the Islamic Institute in Halabja from 1967 onward. A large number of Kurdish youths and religious figures had united under Mullah Othman's teaching and leadership, as he was a hugely respected, charismatic, and influential scholar in the area. This following created a fertile ground for the group's later secession from the Iraqi Islamic Party because of the conflict between the MB's officially unpronounced pan-Arabist Islamic unity ideology and the Kurdish nationalist view embraced by Mullah Othman and his followers, who sought recognition of Kurdish rights within a post-Baathist Islamic state. The Kurdish Islamists were bitterly disappointed by the failure of the Arab-dominated and discreetly nationalist-inclined MB to condemn the genocidal Anfal campaign launched by Saddam Hussein in 1987 and later the 1988 Halabja gas attack, as well as the general discrimination the Kurds were suffering at the hands of an Arab nationalist chauvinistic regime in

Baghdad. Furthermore, the inclination and desire of Kurdish religious nationalists to embrace armed struggle against the Baathist regime in Baghdad did not fit the MB's modus operandi, given its rejection of armed jihad. The MB rejected violent methods such as armed struggle against local governments. The MB was also reluctant to spill the blood of other Muslims even if they were secular and oppressive.

Consequently, the creation of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan fell to Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz, who also founded the Union of Muslim Scholars of Kurdistan and was originally responsible for the northern Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Mullah Othman and his followers had fallen out with the MB – naturally, as a result of their own and the MB's multiple and overlapping identities. Many of the Iraqi Kurdish members were both Islamists and Kurdish nationalists at the same time – essentially, they were religious nationalists. These two overlapping identities contained the seeds of disaffection with the Muslim Brotherhood, because the MB's leadership displayed a strong attachment to both Islam and Arab nationalism. Basim al-Azami describes, albeit unintentionally, this aspect of the Islamic Party's (and by extension the Muslim Brotherhood's) ideology:

On the home front, the Islamic Party upheld national unity on the basis of Iraqi citizenship irrespective of religion, ethnicity or sect. This was to serve as a nucleus of Pan-Arab unity, which would in turn be the nucleus of Islamic unity as advocated by the party. Unity should be achieved gradually, beginning with the unity of Iraq, then unity of the Arab nation and at some point in the future unity of the Islamic community.¹⁰

10- Romano, "Kurdish Islamist Groups," 8.

The Kurds' sense of disenchantment and disillusionment eventually led to the fragmentation of the Islamic Brotherhood in Iraq, with the Kurds taking a different path in 1987. For many Kurdish Islamists such as Othman Abdul-Aziz, the emphasis on the goal of pan-Arabism was unacceptable. In addition, the books of the renowned Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb were translated into Kurdish, and they influenced the Kurdish Islamists into adopting a jihadist outlook, in effect linking offensive jihad with the peaceful dissemination of Islamic teachings and values. Abdul-Aziz was a great admirer of Qutb and of his translation, commentary, and interpretation of the Quran, especially his epic *Fi Zilal al-Quran*. Given the tension and the sense of injustice about Kurdish suffering, Mullah Othman left the ranks of the MB and eventually, along with some of his loyal and close associates, escaped to Iran in 1987 after a failed uprising in Halabja. The breaking point, at least as far as the emerging Islamic movement was concerned, was reached in that year. In May, people rose up against the Baath Party in Halabja. Among the rebels were Mullah Othman's followers, who were devastated by the enormous atrocities committed against the Kurdish people and the chemical attacks on Kurdish villages in the region. These operations had been stepped up after Saddam's cousin Ali Hassan al-Majeed (also known as "Chemical Ali") had been appointed the head of the Baath Party's Directorate of Northern Affairs; they had forced numerous people from the surrounding countryside to flock to the city of Halabja to seek refuge. Demonstrations and an all-out revolt against Saddam Hussein's regime then broke out in some parts of the city. The regime reacted swiftly and violently. In retaliation for the demonstrations, al-Majeed ordered the demolition of the entire Kani Ashqan quarter of Halabja where the demonstrations had taken place and where Mullah Othman's mosque was located.

An unknown number of demonstrators were arrested. Mullah Othman, together with his brothers Mullah Ali Abdul-Aziz, Mullah Siddiq Abdul-Aziz, and Mullah Omar Abdul-Aziz and a number of followers, including Sheikh Siddiqi Sargati, Mullah Ahmed Kaka Mahmoud, and Sheikh Nuraddin Yaqoub, fled to Iran.

In 1987, after the emigration of these leading Kurdish Muslim Brotherhood figures as well as many people from Halabja and its suburbs to Iranian Kurdistan, initially to Seryas refugee camp near the town of Pawa, the idea of taking up arms against Baghdad was seriously considered. One of the leaders and founders of another Kurdish Islamic group, Sheikh Mohammed Barzini, convinced the Iranian authorities that Mullah Othman and his followers ought to be released from the camp to the city of Sanandaj. It was in Sanandaj that the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan (IMK) was founded and announced with the encouragement and urging of Barzini. It was established as a continuation of the Kurdistan Islamic League Movement (KILM, Bizutnaway Paywandi Islami La Kurdistani Iraq), albeit with a different name that omitted “league.” The KILM had initially been founded in 1978 as a secret underground organization in Iraqi Kurdistan. Its existence was not formally announced until 1984, after its founder Sheikh Mohammed Barzini had emigrated to Iran in the summer of 1983, and it held its first conference in Iran in 1985. With the arrival of Mullah Othman and his followers in 1987 the IMK was transformed into a military-political organization under the leadership of Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz and other major Kurdish religious figures. It had six brigades, each composed of 200 peshmerga.¹¹ From the beginning, the IMK saw fighting against the Baath regime and seeking its overthrow as

11- Salah Barzini, telephone interview with author, March 5, 2015.

major objectives. Consequently, in the midst of intense fighting between the Kurdish peshmerga forces and Iraqi military units, the Iranian regime began training and arming IMK members. The Iranian government played an important role in the organization's financing and protection, with the goal of creating an Islamist force in Iraq and an ally against the Baathists in Baghdad.¹²

On the one hand, what has been seen as the main Islamic trend in Kurdistan is in essence an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood that, in the form of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan and its splinters, morphed into several active organizations in Kurdistan's political arena. On the other hand, the Kurdish Islamists were always part of the Kurdish nationalist movement, even though they had been under the Iraqi MB umbrella since 1954. They were enthusiastic participants in the Kurdish revolt but subscribed to an Islamic ideology. They strongly believed that only true Islam could protect Kurdistan and that the two were intertwined. On September 21, 1970, after the historic Kurdish agreement with Baghdad of March 11, a group of Islamic scholars under the leadership of Mullah Othman Abdul-Aziz held a major conference in the town of Galala in the Balakayati area of Erbil Province. The outcome was the establishment of the Union of Muslim Scholars of Kurdistan (UMSK) (Yaketi Zanayani Ayini Kurdistan).¹³ This was the first conference of its kind, reflecting a religious-nationalist dimension in the Kurdish cause. The major slogan of this conference was "Islam is religion and state" (*al-Islam din wa-dawla*).¹⁴ This gathering had a positive

12- Ibid.

13- Mohammed Salih Hawrami, telephone interview with author, February 20, 2015.

14- Kurdish intellectual (anonymity requested), telephone interview with author, March 10, 2015.

reception, which made Islamists particularly happy throughout Iraqi Kurdistan (including Arab Islamists in Arab Iraq). The UMSK, like its contemporary Arab Iraqi counterpart (the Union of Muslim Scholars), did not explicitly take on a political role. Rather, the UMSK essentially became the Kurdistan front organization for the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, several of the UMSK's members went on to found important Kurdish Islamist movements, as mentioned earlier. Besides serving as the regional front for the Muslim Brotherhood, the UMSK appears to have functioned as a meeting, speaking, and writing venue for Kurdish Islamists in the early days of the movement.¹⁵ The organization had strong support from Mullah Mustafa Barzani. In this period, Mullah Othman's brother, Mullah Ali Abdul-Aziz, also created his own armed Kurdish peshmerga brigade. These were the first armed Islamist Kurdish peshmerga in Kurdistan. In 1970 they were also armed by Mullah Mustafa Barzani as part of the Kurdish liberation movement.

A large number of Islamist groups eventually emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly from the late 1980s onward. Four factors may help to explain their emergence: first, neighboring Iran's influence in Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly from the onset of the Iran-Iraq war and later when Kurdistan became autonomous in 1991; second, the widespread despair in Kurdistan in the wake of the chemical attacks on towns and villages, including Halabja, and the ethnic cleansing campaign (the Anfal campaign) pursued by Baghdad, both of which Kurdish nationalist and leftist parties proved powerless to stop; third, links with a generalized, global Islamist movement that emerged particularly after the retreat of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, known as the Islamic revival

15- Romano, "Kurdish Islamist Groups," 7.

(*al-sahwa al-Islamiyya*); and finally, the failure of the global Islamist parties to condemn clearly the atrocities inflicted on the friendless Muslim Kurds.¹⁶ One or several of these factors played a role in the formation of each of the Kurdish Islamist groups discussed below. Besides the IMK, other, smaller groups were also founded from the beginning of the 1980s onward. These smaller groups were often directly influenced by the Islamic revolution of Iran, supported by the Liberation Movements Office under the Pasdaran Army (Iranian Revolutionary Guards). Indeed, most of them were creations of the Iranian intelligence service. These parties were never well known nor did they gain any noticeable public support.¹⁷ Thus, they did not generally last long. They included the following groups:

- 1- Kurdish Islamic Army: This group was Sunni, and its founder was Abbas Shahin (Abu Osama). It was part of the al-Kutla al-Islamiyya Alliance, and it was destroyed early on by the PUK.
- 2- Islamic Fayli Kurdish Organization: This organization was run by Shi'ite Kurds and comprised three constituent groups, each with its own political perspective: the Muslim Kurdish Movement under the leadership of Hussein Fayli; the Islamic Fayli Kurdish Association, established in 1982 in Tehran; and the Islamic Fayli Kurdish Movement led by Jalil Fayli, with activities confined to limited political work.
- 3- Hizbulah of Kurdistan in Iraq: This party was associated with Sunni Kurds and established in Iran in 1983. Sheikh Mohammed Khalid Barzani was its leader. This party was part of the Supreme

16- Ibid.

17- Sabah Mofidi, "The Process of Leading Change in the Kurdistan Islamic Movement – Iraq: Emergence, Factors and Trends," *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 2, no. 4 (2014): 167–68.

Council alliance that included all Iraqi opposition groups based in Iran. After the 1991 Gulf War, Hizbulah of Kurdistan dissolved itself, encouraging its members to join the KDP under the leadership of Masoud Barzani, the current president of the Kurdistan region in Iraq. It should be noted that Adham Barzani, Sheikh Mohammed Khalid's nephew, defected from his uncle's group in 1988 because of differences of opinion and established another party, called the Kurdistan Revolutionary Hizbulah (KRH). KRH did not succeed in attracting the electorate, and it announced its dissolution in 2004 after the collapse of Saddam's regime, claiming it had reached its objective.

4- Kurdistan Mujahidin Movement: This group was also composed of Sunni Kurds and was founded by Sheikh Abu Talib Barzinji.

These groups did not have a strong following among the people and religious figures of Kurdistan. Most of their members possessed little literacy or religious knowledge; many were from traditional tribal groups that no longer enjoyed a popular following. As noted, they existed mostly thanks to Iranian patronage, particularly the Iranian Liberation Movements Office, so they could not achieve success in Kurdistan. Their principal relationships were with Shi'ite groups, especially the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq.

The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan and Ansar al-Islam after 1991

The IMK participated in the 1991 Kurdish uprising. However, after the uprising, various factions within the IMK gradually came to oppose the Kurdish secular trend. Although the Kurdish Islamists had a substantial following, this following never developed into a paradigm shift in Kurdish politics. The Islamist presence includes the two largest groups as of 2015, the Islamic Group of Kurdistan

(a descendant of the IMK) and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (Kurdistan's branch of the MB), both of which ran in various Iraqi Kurdistan elections since 1992 under various names. For most of that time they came in third, well behind the KDP and the PUK. From 2009 onward they were also overtaken by the Gorran ("change") Movement, despite casting themselves as the main vehicle for protest votes against the two ruling nationalist parties at least in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Following the designation of Kurdistan as a no-fly zone after the 1991 Gulf War, the retreat of the Iraqi government from three Kurdish provinces in October 1991, and subsequently the region's total fall to Kurdish control, all Iraqi Kurdish opposition groups relocated their activities to this region. Naturally, the IMK, the principal Islamic Kurdish political party, also returned to Kurdistan-Iraq. The party continued its activities publicly; the IMK was a formidable military-political force in the region during a period in which tensions gradually escalated and finally culminated in armed conflict.

Some of the IMK's most senior members were Salafi Islamist Kurds returning from the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, which increased pressure within the organization to adopt jihadist tactics. Many of these returning Afghan veterans later broke off from the IMK to establish more violent Islamist groups, demonstrating early on an appetite for IS methods and a rejection of IMK pragmatism. It was these factions within the IMK that played a role in stoking the early tensions with the PUK that eventually led to the fratricidal and bloody war. Essentially, the intellectual origin of the Islamic trend in Kurdistan was the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, especially the thought and teaching of Hassan al-Banna. However, afterward, especially in the 1990s, other Islamic

tendencies mixed with the Kurdish Islamist ideology, including the Salafist ideas of the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan and of former Kurdish jihadists who fought in Afghanistan. Among them was Mullah Krekar, a former jihadist who had returned to Kurdistan in 1992 with extensive training gained in Afghanistan and who became a member of the leadership council of the IMK and later the leader and founder of the radical jihadist group Ansar al-Islam.¹⁸ The IMK incorporated three main factions. These were the pragmatists under the auspices of the Abdul-Aziz brothers, the Islamic fundamentalist ideologues under the leadership of Ali Bapir, and the jihadists led by Mullah Krekar.



Mullah Krekar - Source: <http://goo.gl/hIKhvW>

As a result of the IMK's considerable military power and the PUK's intolerance of political competition, the IMK's military arm found an internal function: in 1993, a serious armed clash took place

18- Ibid., 168.

between IMK and PUK forces in the town of Kifri, which inflamed the whole Kurdish region. With the signing of a ceasefire agreement, such armed clashes eventually ended in 1998. However, because of the ideological and intellectual distance between the two parties, tensions at various levels remained.

The IMK established itself early on within the framework of a common Kurdish administration ruled by the KDP and the PUK, although it set up a separate administrative enclave and political and military infrastructure in the region under its own control, especially in the Hawraman, Halabja, and Sharazoor areas. In December 1993, the military clashes between the PUK and the IMK peaked in some parts of Sulaimani Province and Kirkuk, and the IMK was forced to retreat to the border of Iran. The leadership of the IMK left the region and for several months was under the protection of KDP in the town of Salahaddin. When the tensions between the KDP and the PUK erupted into a civil war in May 1994, most of the IMK's forces fought alongside KDP forces against the PUK. Eventually, following the ceasefire in 1998, the leadership of the IMK returned to its center of power and reconstituted its headquarters in the town of Halabja.

In 1999 the IMK and the Islamic Renaissance Movement (IRM, Bizutnaway Nahthay Islami) – which also considered itself a follower of MB ideology – merged to form the Islamic Union Movement (Bizutnaway Yakbooni Islami). In 2001, as a result of internal tensions among the various component factions, the Islamic Union Movement disintegrated. A consequence was the establishment of the IGK and Ansar al-Islam. Ansar al-Islam ("Helpers of Islam") was an insurgent group active in Iraq and Syria. It was established in Iraqi Kurdistan as a Salafi jihadi Islamist movement that imposed a strict application of Shari'a in the villages it controlled around the

town of Biyara to the northeast of Halabja, near the Iranian border. Ansar al-Islam was formed in September 2001 through the merger of Jund al-Islam (“Soldiers of Islam”), led by Abu Abdullah al-Shafi’i, and a splinter group from the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan led by Mullah Krekar. Abu Abdullah al-Shafi’i, like Mullah Krekar, is believed to have served in Afghanistan. Krekar became the leader of the merged Ansar al-Islam, whilst in the IMK his faction had previously opposed an agreement between the IMK and the dominant Kurdish group in the area, the PUK. Ansar al-Islam provided a refuge for al-Qaeda jihadists who had fled from the US invasion of Afghanistan post-9/11. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is even said to have been seen in the town of Biyara during Ansar al-Islam’s reign from 2001 until the US invasion in 2003. The presence in Iraqi Kurdistan of an al-Qaeda-associated Islamist group, that is, Ansar al-Islam, provided a link to the US war on terror. The 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), elements of Joint Special Operations Command, and CIA Special Activities Division paramilitary officers linked up and were the first to enter Iraq prior to the 2003 US-led invasion. Under the codename Operation Viking Hammer, they organized the Kurdish PUK peshmerga to defeat Ansar al-Islam; this involved a battle for control of the territory occupied by the latter. The PUK was struggling to rout Ansar al-Islam and to recapture the areas under the latter’s control, and given the Ansar’s radical Islamist tendencies it became evident that the USA would be involved in its eradication. Moreover, there were US claims that a chemical weapons production facility had existed in the town of Khurmal under the IGK’s control. Consequently, a few days into the military campaign against Iraq in March 2003, US bombers attacked the Khurmal area near the Iran-Iraq border, where Ansar al-Islam and the IGK forces were deployed. Abu Abdullah al-Shafi’i

subsequently became the leading figure in Ansar and in the anti-US insurgency when Mullah Krekar left the jihadist scene when captured and held in custody en route to Norway. Thus, following the 2003 invasion, Ansar al-Islam became an active insurgent group that fought against the American-led forces and their Iraqi allies. The group later pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. Ansar al-Islam initially comprised approximately 300 men, many of them veterans of the Soviet-Afghan war, with a proportion being neither Kurd nor Arab. The joint US-PUK attack resulted in the deaths of a substantial number of Islamist militants. In September 2003, members of Ansar al-Islam who had fled to Iran after the 2003 joint operation against them by Kurdish and US forces announced the creation of a group called Jama'at Ansar al-Sunna, which was dedicated to expelling US occupation forces from Iraq. Ansar al-Sunna became a prominent insurgent group active in the so-called Sunni Triangle, carrying out kidnappings, suicide bombings, and guerrilla attacks. In December 2007 the Ansar al-Sunna group formally acknowledged its derivation from Ansar al-Islam and reverted to using that name. Ansar al-Islam would later reemerge as a group involved in the Iraqi insurgency but significantly depleted in strength by this battle. The group continued to fight the Iraqi government following the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011, and it sent members to Syria to fight the Syrian government following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. On August 29, 2014, a statement on behalf of 50 leaders of Ansar al-Islam announced that the group was merging with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (which was itself the successor organization of al-Qaeda in Iraq), thereby officially dissolving the organization.

Another important link to the anti-US insurgency is the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Arab Iraq (essentially the Islamic

Party of Iraq). After the 1991 Gulf War, the Brotherhood resumed underground work. They made use of the religious activities sponsored by Saddam Hussein under the “Faith Campaign” that had been launched to combat the Shi’ite opposition and to keep the domestic Sunni population calm amid the immense poverty caused by the sanctions. The Faith Campaign included the imposition of religious manifestations on visual media, the construction of a large number of mosques, the publication of religious books, and the encouragement of Sufi groups, which were supervised by Saddam’s deputy, Izzat al-Duri. This decade-long process fueled Islamic consciousness, anti-Americanism, and anti-Zionism in Iraq. Furthermore, as soon as Saddam had been toppled, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s Jama’at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad emerged on the Iraqi scene as a formidable jihadist organization. In October 2004 this group, too, pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and the anti-US effort. To this end, al-Zarqawi made it his organization’s strategy to draw the Shi’a into the fight. According to his extremist Salafi jihadist ideology the Shi’a were heretics. Through constant attacks on this sect of Islamic faith al-Zarqawi hoped to incite the Shi’a to strike back at the Sunnis, leading to an all-out sectarian war that would eventually prompt the Sunnis to rise up in anger and take Iraq back from the Shi’a. Al-Zarqawi made this strategy known in a letter that was caught by the US, as mentioned earlier.

The IGK were not originally part of the conflict but were most likely intentionally drawn in – possibly as part of the joint US-PUK plan to weaken armed Islamist groups situated in the Kurdistan region. PUK officials claimed that the operation targeted Ansar al-Islam’s fighters, but local people stated that the majority of the dead were from the IGK. The missile strikes that took place in the early hours of March 21, 2003, targeted the IGK. Between 40 and 50 Tomahawk

missiles hit the group's munitions depots and offices. About 100 Islamist peshmerga were killed or wounded, according to a Kurdish military commander. The ICK had been attempting to improve its relations with the secular government, but they were also seemingly close to Ansar al-Islam in terms of both geographic proximity and pragmatic collaboration. Kurdish officials said that they had tried to coax the group's leader, Ali Bapir, and his 1,000 fighters out of the mountains and away from the Ansar.¹⁹

The PUK knew a US airstrike was coming. Bapir and his men stubbornly refused to leave. Their compounds, like those of the Ansar, were struck by missiles. One reportedly hit the Ansar munitions center at Sargat, where US officials had said the guerrillas were manufacturing chemical agents. The ICK agreed, in a de facto surrender, to move its 1,000 fighters out of its stronghold in Khurmal. It seems that US officials and their PUK Kurdish allies had feared that the Ansar and the ICK would merge, giving the extremists nearly 2,000 hardened fighters. But the US airstrikes crippled the ICK's operations.

The ICK was stunned when the first round of US missiles battered its headquarters and military barracks. Unlike Ansar guerrillas, who had retreated to mountain hideouts, ICK fighters had stayed in their positions. Eventually, more than 1,000 ICK members and their families – many of them wounded – attempted to escape by crossing into Iran. Fearing reprisals from the US, the Iranian military, which in the past had let ICK members pass, turned them back. The ICK controlled an area between PUK and Ansar territory, and the PUK justified the attack on the group by arguing that it had refused to allow PUK fighters to use its positions to attack the Ansar. It was unclear why the ICK was targeted, as the group had representative

19- Jeffrey Fleishman, "Airstrikes, Suicide Blast Roil the North," *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/mar/23/news/war-kurds23>.

offices across the Kurdish region and had attempted to keep out of the PUK-Ansar dispute. It seems likely that the PUK was trying to use the war for its own ends. Both the PUK and the US wanted to end the influence of armed Kurdish Islamist fighters in a post-Saddam environment although the IGK was a legitimate and authorized political group. “The entire Islamic movement in Kurdistan will get revenge for this atrocity,” an IMK official stated. To make matters worse, on March 4, 2003, Abdullah Qasrey (IGK politburo member), along with three of his bodyguards and his driver, was shot dead at a PUK checkpoint. PUK officials claimed they had apparently been mistaken for members of the Ansar.

Kurds in the So-Called Islamic State

In sum, the link between ISIS and certain Kurdish individuals reflects a variety of factors. According to the KRG Ministry of Religious Affairs, 500 Kurds have joined ISIS. Of these, 150 have been killed by peshmerga forces, and 50 have returned to Kurdistan and are under interrogation by the KRG’s Interior Ministry. Some audio messages by ISIS have been in Kurdish, and the commander of the attacks on the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobane was reportedly a Kurd from the Garmian area.²⁰ The Kurdish members of the Islamic State are essentially of four types.

The first type comprises radical Islamic fundamentalists subscribing to Salafist jihadism with a total belief in the ascendancy and superiority of Islam over all other forms of governance. This group believes that ethnic nationalism is inferior to the rule of Shari'a and that Islamic teachings are the sole legitimate form of governance; they consequently reject any other form of governance as heretical

20- Nawzad Mahmoud, “ISIS Recruitment in Kurdistan All Dried Up” (2004), <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/071120141> (accessed on April 5, 2015).

and invalid. In a recent video a Kurdish IS militant, before beheading an imprisoned peshmerga, issued threats to Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani. In the video he stated: "As for you, oh Masoud [Barzani], you dog, we are going to behead you and throw you into the trash bin of history. Know that we are men who fear no one. We will institute the laws of Allah, may [He] be exalted and praised."²¹

The second type is represented by vulnerable, impressionable, and purposeless youth who have been radicalized and brainwashed through social media networks to believe in the divine and supernatural power and righteous cause of ISIS. Kurdish youth worship television and social media and are greatly fixated by them. They have been hypnotized by the brutal videos and pictures broadcast by ISIS. These offered an answer to their quest for someone or something to give them a sense of purpose and space to put into practice their beliefs and suppressed emotions.²² The third group of Kurdish IS adherents consists of individuals who were embittered by their negative experiences and the humiliation and killing of friends or relatives at the hands of the PUK during the civil war between the PUK and the IMK in 1993. Their sense of grievance and desire for retribution were further stoked by the US attacks on the IGK and Ansar al-Islam in 2003 and the constant humiliation and discrimination of members of Islamic groups under the often aggressively secular KRG rule of the KDP and the PUK. Mullah Krekar, the leader of Ansar al-Islam, emigrated to Norway and was subsequently incarcerated by the Norwegian

21- Damien Gayle and Simon Tomlinson, "We will cut off your head in the White House': ISIS Threatens to Behead Obama and Turn the U.S. into a 'Muslim province' in New Execution Video," *Daily Mail Online*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2928426/ISIS-claim-execute-Japanese-hostage-24-hours.html>.

22- Aras Mohammed, e-mail interview with author, March 5, 2015.

authorities for allegedly inciting hatred. Before his imprisonment he stressed: “If the Ansar return, they will return from the south, from Mosul, from Kirkuk, from Hamreen where their training camps are. They will not return from Iran. If they return they will claim their rights, the blood of 2,000 of our martyrs – they will extract this right from the throats of the PUK and the KDP.”²³

Finally, the fourth group consists of Kurds who have lost faith in the Kurdish Islamists represented by the KIU and the IGK. They are disillusioned and disenchanted by secular Kurdish rule and also greatly disappointed with both of the major Kurdish Islamic parties that are now part of the unity government in Erbil. This group believes that these parties have diverged from the Islamist agenda and have simply become an extension of the major secular political groups, namely, the KDP, the PUK, and the Gorran Movement.

The deadly and potent Islamist insurgency against the US invasion of Iraq was partly rooted in the IMK and later in the Islamic Union Movement that was formed in 1999 through the merger of the IMK and the IRM. The IRM was founded by Mullah Othman’s brother Mullah Siddiq Abdul-Aziz along with some others, and they, too, considered themselves genuine offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood. They condoned the use of weapons and military force to some extent but were more often focused on missionary activity. The group broke up in 2001 because of internal divisions, splitting into the reconstituted IMK under Mullah Ali Abdul-Aziz, the IGK under Ali Bapir, and the smaller but considerably more aggressive and radical Ansar al-Islam under Mullah Krekar. The Ansar al-Islam and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s Jama’at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad constitute the early cells of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was announced

23- Mullah Krekar, “Weekly Interview” (2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhwr_LLocAQ (accessed on December 20, 2014).

in October 2004, moved its field of operations to Syria in 2011 in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising, and evolved into the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in 2013.

The most obvious reason for ISIS's attacks on Kurdistan was a desire to expand its geographical area. The latest map of the ISIS caliphate includes Kurdistan within its boundaries. In addition, the Kurdistan region is rich in natural resources. The latest ISIS attacks on Kirkuk and Sinjar indicate that the group is desperate to strengthen its economic and administrative status through control of oil wells, refineries, hydroelectric dams, and water resources. Besides, ISIS, just like any other adversary of Kurdistan, wants to destabilize the security situation by sending Kurds who have joined it to fight against the peshmerga. ISIS could persist in the Sunni Arab areas, but it will never be able to survive in the Kurdistan region because Kurds generally prioritize their national identity over their religious affiliations. Another possible reason for ISIS aggression lies in the public statements made by the Kurdistan region president, Masoud Barzani, in July 2014 regarding the possibility of a referendum on independence. This statement may have provoked regional Middle East powers to expend efforts to curtail this move toward Kurdish independence by using ISIS as a proxy.

Even if ISIS is territorially uprooted and militarily defeated, the achievement will be a temporary one; ISIS's radical ideology will survive unless a political solution is reached in both Iraq and Syria. Thus, it is important to emphasize that there are regional and international players who are working relentlessly to implement their own narrow agendas in the Middle East in general and in Iraq and Syria in particular, essentially aligning the Sunni camp against the Shi'a and vice versa. As long as radical Shi'ite and conservative Sunni elements exist, the bloodshed and war will continue, as religious discrimination has a long and gruesome history in Iraq. The so-called Islamic State is

effectively a consequence of three interacting and interlinked factors. The first is competition for regional hegemony among Turkey, Iran, and Arab nations. The second is the spillover of the civil war in Syria. And the third is Sunni grievances in Iraq and the souring of Sunni-Shi'ite relations in Baghdad.

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