

Kurds in the Islamic movement, Islamists in Kurdistan: The Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish Islamist movements

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Introduction

The Muslim Brotherhood or Society of Muslim Brothers (Jam'iyat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin), established in Egypt in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, has directly or indirectly shaped almost all later Islamist movements and parties. From the 1940s onwards, it has stimulated the emergence of branches or franchises of the Brotherhood in other Arab countries and sought close cooperation with similar Islamist movements elsewhere, notably Pakistan's Jamaat-i Islami, founded and led by Abul A'la Maududi.¹ Arab secular governments have commonly been suspicious of the Brotherhood and vacillated between repression and attempts to co-opt it. The secrecy and conspiratorial attitude often attributed to the Brotherhood is largely due to the hostile environment in which it has operated for most of its history. Al-Banna himself was assassinated in 1949. The second most prominent leader and chief ideologue, Sayyid Qutb, spent twelve years in prison before he was executed in 1966. In other countries too, Muslim Brothers suffered imprisonment and torture; in Iraq even execution. Many leading members therefore have chosen to live in exile, notably in Saudi Arabia and later increasingly in Europe or North America.

Beginning in the 1960s and very conspicuously since the 1980s, we see the emergence of an influential transnational network of Islamic activists based in the West. They were students and professionals coming from various Muslim countries; what bound them together was their inspiration by the main thinkers of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i Islami. Although there was the occasional theologian or historian among them, their typical profession was that of engineering. Their vision of Islam was cosmopolitan and self-consciously modern, and detached from the traditional institutions of Islamic scholarship. Supported by Saudi-based institutions in which the Brotherhood also had some influence, this network was quite effective in disseminating the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and its form of organisation to many Asian and African countries.

There is an inevitable tension between Islamism with its universalist claims and nationalism. All Muslims are said to be equal, regardless of ethnicity, but in practice there have been implicit hierarchies. The Muslim Brotherhood has remained a largely Arab movement,

¹ The classical study of the Muslim Brotherhood is Richard P. Mitchell's *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (1969). Of the later studies, it is especially the books by Khalil al-Anani (2016) and Hazem Kandil (2016) that deserve mention for their insight in the inner workings of the Brotherhood. On Maududi and his Jamaat-i Islami, see Nasr 1994; on Maududi's influence on the Muslim Brotherhood, see Hartung 2013, especially Chapter 5. The main intermediary between Maududi and the Arab world was the Indian scholar Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, who translated Maududi's first books and was a pioneer in Islamic internationalism. See Hartung 2004.

dominated by the Egyptian leadership, which appoints the leaders of the branches in other Arab states and assumes the role of counsellor or older brother in relations with movements in other countries. The Brotherhood's attitude towards the Kurds and Kurdish nationalism has been ambiguous at best. Since there exists no independent Kurdish state, the central leadership of the Brotherhood has never formally recognised a Kurdish franchise although there have been numerous personal relations with Kurdish Islamists.

Kurds who were active in Islamist movements influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood have felt the tension between religious and ethnic identity perhaps more strongly than the members of dominant ethnic groups. Some resolved the tension by denying the relevance of ethnic identity. In the transnational network, where English was the commonly used language of communication, ethnicity did not appear to matter much. It was different in contexts such as Syria, where the Brotherhood was distinctly opposed to Kurdish claims of minority rights, or Turkey, where talk of Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood and equality in Islam could not hide the perpetuation of Turkish dominance and obsession with Kurdish separatism among Islamists as well as Kemalists. In these countries, as well as in Iraq and Iran, Kurdish Islamists have vacillated between downplaying and proudly asserting their ethnic belonging, between opposing and accommodating with the nationalist movement.

In this article I shall sketch the impact of the Muslim Brotherhood among the Kurds, the participation of Kurds in Iraqi, Iranian and Turkish Islamist movements as well as transnational Islamic networks, and the emergence of separate Kurdish Islamist movements inspired by the Brotherhood. Although the focus is primarily on the Brotherhood as one of the driving forces, we shall have to take into account the broader political background of the Cold War and American sponsorship of all sorts of anti-communist movements in the region, and the emergence of Saudi Arabia as an increasingly affluent sponsor of anti-communist and religiously conservative activities, for which the Muslim World League (*Rabita*), established in 1962, often served as a vehicle. The emergence of Kurdish Islamist movements separate from those of Turkey, Iraq and Iran was a very significant development of the past forty years that owed much to the major events that constitute a watershed in the region's history: the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, Turkey's military coup of 1980, the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88) and the Afghan jihad against Russian occupation that lasted through the 1980s.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Kurds: Syria and Iraq

As the Muslim Brotherhood's influence gradually increased in Egypt, awareness of its ideas and methods of disciplining and predication appeared to spread beyond the country's borders, and in the course of the 1940s Hasan al-Banna made efforts to establish branches of the Brotherhood in several other Arab countries. In each, he appointed a *muraqib `amm* ('general inspector') as the highest authority; the implication of the term is that these national Brotherhood leaders continued to owe obedience to the Supreme Guide (*murshid `amm*) of the Brotherhood, i.e. al-Banna himself and his elected successors.

It is perhaps not surprising that the Muslim Brotherhood until relatively recently only spread to the Iraqi part of Kurdistan (and possibly the Syrian part, but there is no unambiguous documentation). The Brotherhood never established a formal branch in Turkey or Iran. In both Syria and Iraq, however, various associations similar to the Brotherhood emerged, and by the mid-1940s these merged into the Syrian and Iraqi branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, led by an Egyptian-appointed *muraqib `amm*. (They did not always operate under the name of Muslim Brotherhood, which used various fronts when confronted by hostile governments.)

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which was long the most important branch beside the Egyptian, emerged from the fusion of several existing associations, brought together in 1945-46 by Mustafa al-Siba`i, a cleric who had studied at al-Azhar and who was appointed the *muraqib `amm* by al-Banna. There is no indication that any Kurds took part in the early Syrian Brotherhood or the associations that merged into it; in fact, the province of Al-Jazira, where most of Syria's Kurds lived, was the only province where these associations did not have a regional branch. The most prominent members of the founding generation of Syrian Brothers were all Arabs; we do not find a single Kurdish person mentioned in the existing documentation.² Kurds remain absent in the literature on later phases of the Syrian Brotherhood as well, and conversely the literature on the Syrian Kurds does not mention the Brotherhood except as opponents of Kurdish rights in Syria.³

If the Syrian Brotherhood nonetheless had some influence among the Kurds elsewhere, this was largely due to the widely read books by Mustafa al-Siba`i (d.1964) and his much younger disciple and leading member of the Brotherhood, Said Hawwa (d. 1989). Al-Siba`i moreover was a professor of religious studies at the University of Damascus and had numerous students, including from neighbouring countries. As we shall see below, both men had a significant influence on discussions in Kurdish Islamist circles in Turkey in the 1970s and 1980s.

The extremely bloody suppression of Muslim Brotherhood uprisings by Hafiz Asad's regime, in Aleppo in 1980 and in Hama in 1982, also affected the relations of the Syrian Brothers with the Kurds.⁴ The special forces that carried out the bloodbath in Hama allegedly

² Reissner 1980, pp. 97-100, 111-12. Biographies of prominent persons in the early Brotherhood are given in an Appendix to this book (pp. 420-30); none of the persons listed is Kurdish.

³ Tejel 2009, *passim*. Tejel emphasises the Arab nationalist position adopted by the Brotherhood vis-à-vis the Kurds, and mentions the regime's use of largely Kurdish special forces in the suppression of the 1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama. In a recent detailed and well-informed survey of religious groups among Syria's Kurds (Yıldırım 2015, pp. 393-425), the Muslim Brotherhood is not mentioned at all. Anecdotal evidence suggests that very small numbers of Kurds joined the Brotherhood. One of my interlocutors, a Kurd from Afrin, mentioned three young men from his region who did so; two of them had grown up in a Sunni Arab part of the country, where their father worked as a civil servant, the other was a professional soldier.

⁴ On the confrontation of the regime and the Brotherhood during 1980-82, see Batatu 1982 and Seale 1988, pp. 320-44.

comprised a large number of Kurds, which is said to have caused a lasting hostility of the Syrian Brotherhood towards the Kurds. Members of the Aleppo Brotherhood found refuge across the Turkish border, where they were protected by the Turkish intelligence services were but obliged to carry out several covert operations in Syria, which included a massacre of Kurdish political activists who had fled Turkey.⁵ The well-established connections of the Turkish intelligence services with Syrian Islamic activists became a major factor in the developments since 2011, which no doubt further strengthened the mutual distrust of Brothers and Kurds.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Iraq

The case of Iraq is different from that of Syria; here we find Kurds playing leading roles in the Brotherhood from the beginning. The central figure was a Sunni Arab from Mosul, Muhammad Mahmud al-Sawwaf, who had obtained a doctorate in Islamic law at al-Azhar and soon after his return to Iraq in 1946 or 1947 was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Baghdad. During his studies in Cairo he had been inducted into the Muslim Brotherhood and had developed close personal relations with al-Banna, who urged him to establish a franchise in Iraq and appointed him as its *muraqib`amm*. Al-Sawwaf's early efforts were endorsed and supported by Amjad al-Zahawi, a Kurd originally from Sulaimani who was then perhaps Iraq's most prominent senior Sunni Islamic scholar and who had been one of al-Sawwaf's teachers. Al-Zahawi was the public figurehead for the first formal associations of Brotherhood inspiration, the Society for the Salvation of Palestine in 1948 and the Society of Islamic Brotherhood (*Jam`iyyat al-Ukhuwwa al-Islamiyya*) in 1951.⁶

The ground had been prepared well before al-Sawwaf's return by a small number of Egyptian Brothers who taught at Baghdad's College of Engineering and in Basra in the early 1940s. They awakened their students' interest in the religious and political ideals of the Brotherhood and set up the first cells (*usra*).⁷ Al-Sawwaf set up his first *usra* in Mosul and another one among his students at the Faculty of Islamic Law in Baghdad. In 1952 he and al-Zahawi

⁵ The journalist Raşit Kısacık (2010) describes, thirty years after the fact, how Turkish intelligence officers directed the assassination, by Brotherhood activists, of the entire leadership of the Kurdish Marxist movement Kawa in their safehouse in Qamishli, where they had fled after the September 1980 military coup. The involvement of the Brotherhood in this well-known event had not previously been reported.

⁶ Schulze 1990, pp. 105-6; al-`Azami 2002, pp. 164-6; Obeid 2010, pp. 31-2. Al-Zahawi belonged to a highly respected family of ulama and intellectuals originally associated with the Baban emirate. Al-Sawwaf belonged to the powerful Arab Shammar tribe.

⁷ Al-`Azami, who is himself a leading member of the Iraqi Brotherhood, gives the names of the teachers and members of the first cell in Baghdad, adding the observation that it was ethnically mixed. He mentions specifically one Turkmen student (al-`Azami 2002, p. 164. See also Siwayli 2009, p. 46; Obeid, 2010, pp. 31-2.

visited Halabja in Kurdistan, where they established the third major *usra*, appointing the scion of a well-known family of religious scholars, Mela Osman Abdelaziz, as its mentor.⁸

For a long time, Mela Osman Abdelaziz, his brothers Ali and Siddiq Abdelaziz, and a small group of their followers in and near Halabja were the only well-known Muslim Brothers in Kurdistan, and most later Ikhwan in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan owe their affiliation to this little group. There were, however, other groups of Kurdish Ikhwan. Lokman Karadağ, who interviewed Iraqi Kurdish Brothers in various regions, mentions that Kurds studying in Baghdad in the mid-1940 had been the first to bring the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood to Erbil and that in the early 1950s Ikhwan activity spread, also through university students, from Mosul to Duhok and Bamarni in Badinan.⁹

Unlike the Ikhwan elsewhere, the Halabja group of Kurdish Muslim Brothers did not belong to the educated urban middle class: Mela Osman was a traditional small-town mullah with a traditional but thorough madrasa education, and in this region the influence of the Brotherhood among the Kurds long remained restricted to that social circle. All mosques in Halabja and its surroundings were controlled by clerics affiliated with Mela Osman's Brotherhood group.

The fortunes of the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood fluctuated, as periods of repression and co-optation succeeded one another. In 1954, the Society of Islamic Brotherhood was banned, its offices, bookshops and libraries closed, the publishing licence of its journal cancelled.¹⁰ It entered its first period of underground activity, which lasted until the military coup that overthrew the kingdom and established a republic.¹¹ Under Qassim's left-leaning regime (1958-63), the Brotherhood emerged from illegality but faced strong opposition from the Communist Party, against which it had directed most of its political agitation in the previous decade. However, it managed to establish its own legal political party, the Iraqi Islamic Party (*al-Hizb al-Islami al-'Iraqi*). It also established a women's wing, the Muslim Sisters Society, which was headed by al-Zahawi's daughter, Nahla al-Zahawi.¹²

⁸ Obeid 2010, pp. 17-18

⁹ Karadağ 2017, pp. 64-6. Karadağ bases himself on interviews with members of the United Islamic Party of Kurdistan (Yekgirtû), the current embodiment of the Brotherhood, in various parts of Kurdistan. Similar observations in Siwayli 2017.

¹⁰ Al-'Azami 2002, p. 165; Shareef 2015, p. 15.

¹¹ Majid Khadduri (1969, pp. 145-6) claims that there was a 'noticeable revival' of Brotherhood activities shortly before the 1958 coup, starting in Mosul and spreading from there to Baghdad and Ramadi. He also notes the Brotherhood was initially supportive of Qassim but turned against him when they believed he was too sympathetic to the communists.

¹² Al-'Azami 2002, pp. 166-70; Dann 1969: 304-6.

In spite of the presence of prominent Kurdish persons such as Amjad al-Zahawi and Osman Abdelaziz in its ranks,¹³ the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood refrained from involvement in discussions on the status of the Kurds in the Iraqi state. Its consistently anti-communist and Arab nationalist attitude went apparently unquestioned by its Kurdish members.¹⁴ It did appeal to Kurdish solidarity with Arab fellow Muslims in times of crisis, however. In 1966, Muslim Brothers asked Mela Mustafa Barzani to intercede with Nasser to prevent the execution of Sayyid Qutb.¹⁵

The Arab nationalist regime of the Arif brothers (ruling 1963-66 and 1966-68), though generally oppressive, allowed the Muslim Brothers some breathing space. For a brief period, Iraq was even considered as a haven for Ikhwan who were persecuted elsewhere.¹⁶ When the Baath party came to power, however, the tide turned. The Brotherhood was ordered to cease all activities and in 1971 several of its most prominent members were executed. The *muraqib`amm* of the day, Abdelkarim Zeydan, decided not to risk his followers' lives and ordered them to disband the organisation and refrain from all activities.¹⁷ The Iraqi Islamic Party only resurfaced after the American invasion in 2003, but its strength suggested that the Brotherhood had kept an underground network alive in the Sunni Arab triangle.¹⁸

The ban of Muslim Brotherhood activity appears to have affected the Kurdish Brothers less than it did those in Baghdad and Iraq's Arab Sunni triangle. Both Mela Mustafa Barzani and Jalal Talabani knew Mela Osman Abdelaziz well and showed him respect. During the early 1970s Mela Osman and his followers enjoyed freedom in the region controlled by Barzani; in 1974 he took part in a diplomatic mission to Saudi Arabia on behalf of Barzani.¹⁹ Meanwhile, young Kurdish activists intensified underground Brotherhood organising and preaching in the Duhok and Bamarni districts of Badinan. Thus during the 1970s and 1980s, two mutually

¹³ According to Mofidi 2015, p. 20, Mela Osman Abdelaziz and two other personalities from Halabja, Abdulaziz Prazani and Omar Rashawi held leading positions in the Iraqi Islamic Party.

¹⁴ The Iraqi Islamic Party called in its program for the liberation of Palestine, Algeria and Oman from occupation, but endorsed a unitary Iraq as part of the Pan-Arab nation, which was in turn to be the core of Islamic unity. Siwayli 2017, p. 4; al-`Azami 2002, p. 170.

¹⁵ Siwayli 2017: 4.

¹⁶ In 1963, the Malaysian Islamist activist Zulkifli Muhammad, in search of scholarships for Malaysian students, was told by his Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood contact to visit Iraq, because its then President, Abdussalam Arif, was sympathetic to the Brotherhood. He met the Iraqi Minister of Awqaf (Pious Endowments), who was in fact a member of the Brotherhood, and who offered ten scholarships for study in Iraq. Zulkifly Abdul Malek 2011, pp. 23-4.

¹⁷ Al-`Azami 2002, pp. 166-73; Obeid 2010, pp. 39-40; Shareef 2015, p. 15. Al-Sawwaf had been forced into exile in 1961 and Zeydan had been chosen to replace him.

¹⁸ Shareef 2015, p. 16.

¹⁹ Obeid 2010, pp. 17-18, 43-4.

independent Brotherhood networks were active in Iraqi Kurdistan, one in the Sorani-speaking region of Halabja and Sulaymani, the other in Kurmanji-speaking Badinan.²⁰

The political developments in Iraq thus detached the Kurdish Ikhwan to some extent from the official Iraqi branch of the Brotherhood, but they never gained official recognition by the central leadership of the Brotherhood. There could not be an official Kurdish branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, just like the Communist International would never recognise a Kurdish Communist Party. The Brotherhood only established franchises at the level of the nation state and moreover like most Arab nationalists tended to be suspicious of Kurdish ‘separatism.’

The Iraq-Iran war and the Afghan jihad

During the Iraq-Iran war, many Iraqi Kurdish Islamist activists sought refuge in Iran. Some stayed in Iranian Kurdistan and were in contact with Iranian Kurdish Islamists (and, inevitably, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and intelligence services). Others went on to Pakistan, where they joined the Afghan Mujahidin (notably Gulbaddin Hikmatyar’s *Hizb-i Islami*, which was ideologically closest to the Brotherhood) or the international jihadist circles of ‘Arab Afghans.’ Here they deepened their acquaintance with the works of Maududi and Qutb on *jihad*, the Islamic state, and the condemnation of contemporary Arab rulers as apostates who governed by other laws than those of God. They met, or became acquainted with the ideas of, Abdullah Azzam, who declared jihad against infidel occupying regimes a universal duty for each Muslim, and Egyptian radicals who believed in the obligation of *jihad* against secular Arab regimes. These revolutionary ideas were quite different from the moderate, gradualist strategy of the Brotherhood mainstream, which emphasised Islamisation by preaching, disciplining and institution building.

According to some sources, Iran attempted in vain to persuade the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood to establish a militia that would take part in the war on the Iranian side. The international leadership of the Brotherhood had initially been very supportive of the Iranian Revolution and downplayed the difference between Sunni and Shi`i Islam, but the relations cooled considerably from the early 1980s onward, when Iran accused the Brotherhood of siding with Saddam Hussein in the conflict between the neighbour countries.²¹

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, Syria was a major strategic ally, and that did not change after the extremely violent suppression of a Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising in Hama and Aleppo in 1982. Said Hawwa’s furious indictment of Iran for this lack of Islamic solidarity

²⁰ Karadağ 2017, pp. 69-83.

²¹ Youssef Nada, an Egyptian businessman who often acted as the Brotherhood’s representative in the international arena, had helped Iran bypassing an American trade embargo and delivered great quantities of steel and wheat. After his main Iranian contact, President Bani Sadr, fell out of grace and fled to France in mid-1981, the brief honeymoon between Sunni and Shi`i Islamists was over. See the narrative in Nada’s memoir, Nada / Thompson 2012, pp. 59-64.

posed a grave dilemma for Muslim Brothers and their sympathisers elsewhere.²² The other factor, obviously, was the war between Iraq and Iran, in which the Brotherhood tended to gravitate towards the Arab side. This was ultimately to lead to a break between Iraq's Kurdish and Arab Brothers.

Towards the end of the war, somewhere in 1986-88, Iran did succeed in bringing Kurdish Islamists of various backgrounds and experiences together in a military-political formation named the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (*Bizûtnewey Islamiy Kurdistan*). Mela Osman Abdelaziz broke away from the Muslim Brotherhood to lead this new group.²³ This movement only became a significant political force after 1991, when in the wake of the second Gulf War a large part of Kurdistan had been freed from central government control and become de facto semi-independent. Many activists who had lived in exile in Iran or had taken part in the Afghan jihad returned to Kurdistan and joined Mela Osman's movement. This included such men as Mela Krêkar, a charismatic veteran of the Afghan jihad, poet and scholar and his jihadist followers, and Islamist radicals such as Ali Bapir, who had spent many years in Iran and was fiercely opposed to secular Kurdish nationalism.²⁴

Not all Kurdish Muslim Brothers followed Mela Osman in joining this pro-Iranian outfit. A group led by Salaheddin Bahaeddin, one of Mela Osman's younger colleagues from a village near Halabja, refused to take up arms against Saddam Hussein and insisted on the non-military Islamic struggle.²⁵ For several years, Salaheddin Bahaeddin was recognised by the international leadership of the Brotherhood as the head of the Iranian franchise. (He worked closely with Naser Sobhani, an Iranian Kurd from Pawe, who de facto headed the network of Iran's Kurdish Muslim Brothers but did not have Bahaeddin's international contacts. He was executed by the regime in 1990.) After 1991, Salaheddin Bahaeddin and his followers returned to Iraqi Kurdistan. In 1994 this group emerged as the Kurdistan Islamic Union (*Yekgirtûy Islamiy Kurdistan*), the one Kurdish group that embodies the Ikhwan ideology, form of organisation, and method of disciplining.²⁶

²² Aslan 2014, p. 192. Aslan, a Kurdish Islamic activist from Turkey, was living in Iran then and still sympathetic to the spirit of the revolution, while also considering Said Hawwa as a major source of inspiration. The dilemma is palpable in several passages of his memoir.

²³ Romano 2007, p. 8; Obeid 2010, pp. 54-9; Siwayli 2009; Shareef 2015, pp. 20-21. Some studies have claimed that Mela Osman's break with the Brotherhood was a response to the poison gas attack on Halabja in March 1988 and the Muslim Brotherhood's failure to condemn it, but he had probably broken with it before. As Germiyani (1992, p. 136-7) explains, Mela Osman left Iraqi Kurdistan for Iran in the wake of a brutally suppressed uprising against village destructions and forced resettlement in 1987. The Iraqi Ikhwan had refused to show solidarity with the Kurds and declared Iran, not Saddam's regime, to be the chief enemy against whom jihad was obligatory (ibid, pp. 139-41).

²⁴ Romano 2007, pp. 8-10; Shareef 2015, pp. 27-31; Obeid 2010, pp. 80-7.

²⁵ Obeid 2010, p. 58.

²⁶ The chronology of these events is unclear; the available accounts are summary and vague: Obeid 2010, pp. 63-4; Baghali 2019, pp. 79-81; Karadağ 2017, pp. 78-82.

The militants who had joined Mela Osman's IMK appeared to be pressuring the movement towards a more militant course and confrontation with the dominant secular forces, KDP and PUK. Mela Osman and his brother Ali, however, steered a more pragmatic course. They cultivated civil relations with the two secular nationalist parties and succeeded in integrating the IMK as the third significant political movement in the political system of Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁷ By 2000, most of the radicals had left the movement and established their own Salafi jihadist formations (Jund al-Islam, Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Sunna), which for a few years controlled parts of the mountainous Hawraman region. They were joined there by Arab and foreign jihadists.²⁸ Another major breakaway section was the Komelî Îslamîy Kurdistan (Kurdistan Islamic Group), established by Ali Bapir in 2001, which in spite of its radical beginnings gradually sought incorporation in the established political order as an officially recognised Islamic party.²⁹

Muslim Brotherhood influences among the Iranian Kurds

The Kurds constitute the largest Sunni community in Iran, and unlike the situation in Syria or Iraq, the Kurds therefore have not had to contend with an Iranian franchise of the Brotherhood in which they were themselves a minority. It is true that among the (Persian and Azeri) Shi'i majority there existed a radical Islamist movement that was considered as a counterpart to the Brotherhood (the Fida'iyan-i Islam led by Nawab Safavi), but this organisation had no interest in others than Shi'is. Kurdish Islamism in Iran therefore was strongly oriented towards Iraqi Kurdistan, where several of the leading Islamists studied. It is in fact surprising that none of the most prominent Iranian Kurdish Islamists studied in Egypt. The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood was therefore only indirect. As noticed above, it was an Iraqi Kurd, Salaheddin Bahaeddin, who was said to be recognised as the representative of the (international) Brotherhood for Iran in the early 1980s. The most prominent of the Iranian Kurds with whom he worked was Naser Sobhani, who had done his religious studies with Islamic scholars across the border, in the Iraqi part of Hawraman. His education was strongly coloured by Naqshbandi Sufism, but he also studied Islamist literature there, especially the works of Maududi.³⁰

There was yet a more influential Iranian Kurdish Islamist, Ahmad Moftizade of Sanandaj, who had established a reformist school and association by the name of Maktab-i Qur'an. Moftizade was from a prominent family of religious scholars. Having received a solid

²⁷ Leezenberg 2006; Romano, 2007; Shareef 2015.

²⁸ The jihadist groups are beyond the scope of this article. But see International Crisis Group 2003; Romano 2007; Siwayli 2020.

²⁹ Obeid 2010, pp. 22-3, 80-3; Siwayli 2020.

³⁰ Baghali 2019, pp. 73-4. Baghali mentions yet another Iraqi Kurd in the leadership of the Iranian Brothers, the treasurer Abu Amir.

grounding at home had continued his religious education in Halabja, where he probably became acquainted with the ideas of Maududi and the Muslim Brotherhood. But he had also spent time at Tehran University, where he became acquainted with Iranian reformist Muslim thinkers, from Mehdi Bazargan to Ali Shariati, who had a great influence on his thought.³¹ In the years of the Iranian revolution he believed that he, as a known opponent of the Shah, a former political prisoner and friend of some leading revolutionaries, was in the right position to negotiate with the new regime on behalf of the Kurds and propose a form of autonomy that was compatible with Islamic governance. However, he soon found himself in conflict with the secular, leftist nationalists and not much later with the Shi`a supremacist regime as well. There was a brief attempt on the part of the international Muslim Brotherhood to intervene with the central government on his behalf but that remained unsuccessful. In 1982 Moftizade was arrested; he spent the next 11 years in prison and died soon after his release in 1993.³²

Maktab-i Qur'an was thus decapitated. A similar fate later befell the Jama`at-i Da`wat wa Islah, as Bahaeddin and Sobhani's group was called. The leadership was arrested; Sobhani was executed in 1990, and the Iraqi Kurds among them were sent back to Iraq. Both movements survived precariously, and both split after the death of their leaders. The largest faction of Maktab-i Qur'an is led by Sa`edi Qoreyshi, who had acted as Moftizade's spokesperson and deputy during his imprisonment, and who led the movement away from political engagement to a quietist path of self-purification. The smaller faction is led by Hasan Amini, who holds that social and political engagement is an inevitable aspect of Muslim life and who cultivates good relations with the Ikhwanist Jama`at-i Da`wat wa Islah. The most visible faction of the latter movement, led by Abdurrahman Pirani, is officially recognised by the government and has offices in Tehran. This faction of the Jama`at-i Da`wat wa Islah has also members belonging to other Sunni ethnic groups, Baluch and Turkmen, and shows no interest in specifically Kurdish issues. The other faction, led by Ali Rahmani and Abdullah Erani in Sanandaj and Ibrahim Mardokhi in Mariwan, represents a more 'Kurdish' Ikhwani tradition. They had first been inducted into the Brotherhood in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1970s and were among the first to bring Brotherhood ideas and practices to Iran. Currently none of the factions of either movement appears to have international contacts.³³

Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Kurds

The Muslim Brotherhood never attempted to establish a franchise in Turkey, but its ideology began gaining some influence there from the late 1960s onwards through translations of books by Sayyid Qutb and Maududi, and later other Brotherhood authors as well. It was Turkish students studying in Egypt, Syria and Iraq who were the first mediators; groups in

³¹ Mofidi 2015b; Ezzatyar 2016; Bruinessen 2017.

³² It was Youssef Nada who carried out the Brotherhood's mission to reconcile the regime and Muftizade, described in Nada / Thompson 2012, pp. 60-5.

³³ Mofidi 2015; Baghali 2019, pp. 65-77; author interview with Sabah Mofidi, 26 February 2020.

which these ideas were received and discussed included the nationalist-Islamist Mücadele Birliđi (Union of Struggle) and the *Milli Görüş* movement of Necmettin Erbakan.

The Mücadele Birliđi, established in 1967, was one of the earliest legal vehicles of political Islam. It appears to have emerged, with covert support from the state, in response to the rise of the left (the trade union DISK in 1961 and the Turkish Workers Party (TİP) in 1965). Its periodical *Yeniden Milli Mücadele* ('The National Struggle Again') was remarkable for its fiercely anti-communist, anti-Semitic, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and conservative nationalist discourse.³⁴ Its first headquarters were at the Department of Theology (Yüksek İslam Enstitüsü) in the conservative city of Konya. In an interview, the former secretary general reminisces on student friends who were in contact with the Brotherhood in Cairo and Damascus, and others studying in Baghdad who reported on religious groups in Iraq. Qutb and Maududi were avidly read and discussed, as were the ideas of the Hizb ut-Tahrir, with its aim of re-establishing the Caliphate, but radical Turkish nationalism prevailed over Islamic internationalism in the Mücadele Birliđi.³⁵ The association remained a relatively small group that did not survive beyond the 1970s, but some of its members later reached influential positions in the AKP government and the Gülen movement. Its best known Kurdish member was the young Altan Tan (b. 1958), who was in the early 1990s briefly active in the Islamist Refah party and was later to join the legal pro-Kurdish political parties.³⁶

Necmettin Erbakan and the Milli Görüş movement

No one made a greater contribution to the institutionalisation of Islamism in Turkey than Necmettin Erbakan, a German-trained engineer turned politician closely allied with the small and medium businessmen of Central and Eastern Anatolia. He established a succession of 'pro-Islamic' political parties, of which the National Salvation Party (MSP, 1973-80) and the Welfare Party (Refah, 1983-98) were the most successful. *Milli Görüş* (National Vision), is the name of the ideology as well as the movement behind these parties; it also became the name of the federation of mosque associations in the European diaspora that was the movement's foreign wing.

³⁴ Aydın 2004; Selçuk 2018.

³⁵ Erişen 1994. In this interview, Necmettin Erişen suggests two reasons why the ideas of Maududi and Qutb were rejected by the forces that ran the Mücadele Birliđi: their un-national foreignness and their reformism, which were unacceptable to traditionalist, conservative Turkish Muslims. He implies that Turkey's "deep state" kept a close watch over this association and did not want any kind of foreign influence. See also Selçuk 2018, pp. 119, 122.

³⁶ Altan Tan was one of many Kurdish members of the Refah Party who felt betrayed when in 1991 Erbakan concluded a tactical alliance with the ultranationalist, fascist (and anti-Kurdish) National Labour Party. Most could be lured back to the party in the following years with interesting job offers, but Tan refused to return. See Tan 2019, pp. 478-80; Çalmuk 2001, pp. 52-3.

For legal reasons, political party programs in Turkey could not overtly refer to Islam; Erbakan did so opaquely by his use of the term '*milli*', which had strong historical connotations of nationality defined by religion. In the wake of the First World War, the *Misak-i Milli* ('National Pact') and the *Milli Mücadele* ('National Struggle') united the Muslims of the defeated Ottoman Empire in a new war effort to expel Greeks, Armenians and foreigners from the territory that became Turkey. Unlike the Kemalist understanding of the nation, which was defined by state borders but stressed its Turkish character, Erbakan and his friends understood '*milli*' in this older sense as defined by religion rather than ethnicity and including Turks as well as Kurds and potentially Arabs, without much regard for de facto state boundaries. Within this multi-ethnic nation, the overarching identity was considered to be Turkish. In retrospect, a prominent Kurdish activist of the MSP's youth movement describes the party's ideology as 'Turkish-centred Islamism' (*Türk merkezli İslamcılık*). Though strongly aware of his Kurdish identity, he considered 'ethnic nationalism' as racism and incompatible with the universal spirit of Islam.³⁷

The Milli Görüş ideology showed a certain similarity to ideas associated with the Muslim Brotherhood but with a distinctly Turkish slant. Erbakan contrasts his 'National Vision' with its main competitors, the liberal and leftist visions, which are inherently internationalist and secular. Core to his vision is pride in the history of the Ottoman Muslim 'nation' (*millet*) and commitment to safeguarding the spiritual values and material well-being of the nation. Moral values are to be grounded in the family and women's traditional role and need to be salvaged from the deleterious effects of secularisation and Westernisation. The Muslim nation faces internal and external enemies. Zionism and European Christianity are hostile to Turkey and the Muslim world and conspire to weaken them. The European Common Market is a Christian project to assimilate and subjugate Turkey. Against these threats, Erbakan pleads for economic autarky, the stimulation of heavy industry, and close economic and political cooperation with the Muslim world.³⁸

Erbakan had been the chairman of the union of chambers of commerce (TOBB), the body representing Turkey's small and medium-scale businessmen, and the *Milli Görüş* ideology represents to some extent the interests of this social class and their opposition to the liberal economic policies favoured by the large internationally oriented capital groups. In elections, the MSP and the parties that succeeded it found their strongest support in the conservative heartland of Central Anatolia rather than the more developed (and generally less religious-minded) coastal regions. The party cadres included many Kurds; in fact, Kurds had provided crucial help in the early stages of party organisation and were probably long over-represented among the party's activists.³⁹ When the MSP took part in a short-lived coalition government

³⁷ Metiner 2004, p. 25-6.

³⁸ The authoritative statement is in a book by Necmettin Erbakan himself, titled *Milli Görüş* (1975). Due to legal restraints, Erbakan had to express his Islamist and neo-Ottomanist vision in veiled terms.

³⁹ This is brought out clearly in Çalmuk 2001.

with the Republican People's Party in 1974-5, four of the seven ministers it contributed to the cabinet were Kurds (or at least had been elected by Kurdish constituencies).⁴⁰

Kurds always remained well represented in the MSP and Refah, as well as in the AKP, which is to some extent also a successor, though not only of the Milli Görüş lineage. These Kurds were not very conspicuous, however, because they rarely if ever referred explicitly to Kurdish identity and Kurdish concerns. Unlike the other political parties, the MSP did not deny Turkey's ethnic diversity and recognised the existence and history of the Kurds, but it stressed that all Muslims were brothers and was wary of anything resembling ethnic separatism. Kurds and other ethnic groups were not seen as other than Turkish but as subgroups of the larger Turkish Muslim nation. Kurdish-Turkish brotherhood within the party meant in practice that the Kurdish members often had to put up with patronising and discriminating attitudes on the part of Erbakan and other leaders.

The movement was not as tightly organised and disciplined as the Brotherhood, but had a similar youth movement, the *Akıncılar*, with small groups studying books together, and organised retreats or summer camps where reading was combined with physical exercise and martial arts training. The Milli Görüş movement of the 1970s was the incubator of Turkish Islamism to which all later Islamist groups owe a debt, although they may later have parted ways with it. Many of the young activists were already in the late 1970s disaffected with Erbakan's leadership and sought inspiration abroad.

There appears not to have been any direct connection between the Milli Görüş movement and the Muslim Brotherhood, at least not during the first decade. (Later, from the 1980s or 1990s onwards, Erbakan and a few other leaders took part in periodical meetings between Muslim Brotherhood and Jama'at-i Islami leaders with other Islamic movements.) The movement owed part of its Islamic credentials to the endorsement by a shaykh of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Unlike the Brotherhood, which in theology was influenced by the reformist Salafism of Rashid Rida, Milli Görüş remained traditionalist and respectful of Sufism. Conservative, neo-Ottomanist Islamist authors such as Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, Kadir Mısıroğlu, Mehmet Şevki Eygi and Sezai Karakoç retained a stronger influence over the rank-and-file of the Milli Görüş movement than the reformist Arab and Indian-Pakistani thinkers.

The young radicals in Milli Görüş: Akıncılar

The student activists of the 1970s in the MSP's youth wing (the *Akıncılar*), however, were fascinated by the works of Qutb and Maududi, Hasan al-Banna and Said Hawwa that had recently become available in Turkish translation. Kurds were strongly represented among

⁴⁰ Çalmuk 2001, p. 13. At the time, this composition of the government was considered as a tacit sign of Erbakan's gratitude for Kurdish support. This coalition government lasted less than a year. In 1975, the MSP entered a right-wing coalition that included the fascist and anti-Kurdish Party of Nationalist Action (MHP), overriding protest from some of its Kurdish deputies (ibid., pp. 15-16).

these Islamist student activists.⁴¹ Student life in those days was dominated by ideological and increasingly also armed confrontations between three major groups: the left (which included most secular Kurdish activists), the Turkish ultranationalists / fascists, and the Islamists. The MSP twice concluded a political alliance with the ultranationalists during the 1970s, to the chagrin of its Kurdish members; the *Akıncı* student activists shared with the left a concern with poverty, inequality and injustice. One former activist remembers the elation with which they read Sayyid Qutb's book on *Social Justice in Islam*, Mustafa al-Siba'i's *The Socialism of Islam* and, later in the decade, Ali Shariati's *On the Sociology of Islam* and *The Hajj*.⁴² The fascists called these young radical Islamists 'green communists'; the charismatic leader of the *Akıncılar* in Istanbul's Fatih district, Metin Yüksel, was attacked and killed by fascist thugs in 1979, which caused a lasting divide between the two movements.⁴³

The Iranian revolution caused great excitement and enthusiasm, especially among the MSP's young radicals. After Pakistan, where general Ziaul Haq toppled Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's secular government in 1977 and initiated a program of Islamisation of society and state, applying Maududi's ideas, and after Iran, where the Shah's secular regime was overturned by a popular revolution in 1979 and an Islamic Republic was proclaimed, they believed Turkey might be next in line. They began openly calling for an Islamic system and implementation of the Shariah. The Afghan resistance to the Russian occupation, also beginning in 1979, was yet another source of inspiration. Many perceived in the Iranian revolution and the Afghan jihad the practical implementation of the ideas of Qutb and Maududi.

Turkey's military coup of 12 September 1980 was primarily directed against the left and Kurdish movements but radical Islamists were also arrested and sentenced to long jail terms. Unknown numbers escaped to Europe or Iran; some of them ended up in Pakistan and joined (or, more likely: were in contact with) the Afghan Mujahidin, especially Hekmatyar's *Hizb-i Islami*. It appears likely that the escapees from Turkey were, like their counterparts from Iraq, exposed to the latest developments in Brotherhood and Jama'at-i Islami discourse there, including Abdallah Azzam's theology of jihad, but there are no clear traces of such influences in later developments in Turkey. Of those who spent time with the Mujahidin in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the only one to write memoirs that I am aware of was Yakup Aslan. Wishing younger people to learn from his experiences and mistakes, he stresses his disappointment with the Mujahidin and their incessant infighting. He soon left Afghanistan

⁴¹ This is also clear from the memoirs by three activists of this generation: Metiner 2004, Yüksel 2015, and Aslan 2014. It is probably not a coincidence that all three are Kurdish. Yüksel writes, of the period that he studied at Ankara's left-dominated Middle East Technical University and led a group of Islamist student activists, that most of them were Kurdish and that they read modern Arab or Persian authors, unlike the older Islamists, who were attached to the traditional schools of Islamic law (Yüksel 2015, p. 173).

⁴² Metiner 2004, p. 41-4, 57-8; similar observations in Yüksel 2015, pp. 172, 222.

⁴³ Metin Yüksel belonged to a well-known and highly respected Kurdish family of religious experts. After his assassination, his older brother Edip, the memorialist, took his place as leader of the *Akıncılar*. See Yüksel 2015, pp. 242-56.

again and spent the remaining years of his ten-year exile in Iran. He had hoped the Iranian revolution would put the concepts of the Islamic state developed by Maududi and Qutb into practice, but it did not take him long to be disillusioned there too, when Iranian *raison d'état* and Shi'a supremacism replaced the revolutionary internationalism of the first years.⁴⁴

Cemaleddin Kaplan's Caliphate movement, which for about a decade (1985-95) flourished in German exile, was also a product of these developments. Kaplan was a more senior person, born in the district of İspir in Erzurum in 1926, who had a career as a cleric in the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and who was a high-ranking MSP member in the 1970s. In the wake of the coup, he was dismissed from Diyanet, along with other suspected radicals. Erbakan sent him to Germany as an inspector of the Milli Görüş organisation there but after some time he broke with that organisation and founded his own movement. Kaplan's political ideas were shaped by Maududi and Qutb, but especially by the model of Iran's Islamic Republic. He was in contact with both the Iranian regime and Afghan Mujahidin, for whom he collected money from Turkish workers. His movement, marginal to developments in Turkey, gradually became a cult group after Kaplan had started calling for the re-establishment of the Caliphate in Turkey and proclaimed himself Caliph.⁴⁵

Transnational Muslim Brotherhood networks and the Kurds

An American think tank report on the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in the USA claims that it all began with three engineering students, who in 1963 established the Muslim Students Association of the United States and Canada (MSA), allegedly a front for the Brotherhood. All three, the author affirms, 'were born in the Kurdish, northern part of Iraq, and may have met there or possibly later in Britain, where all three received their undergraduate education in engineering.' Their names were Ahmad Totonji, Jamal al-Din Barzinji, and Hisham Yahya al-Talib, and they would continue to play pioneering roles in a number of other transnational movements and institutions.⁴⁶ They had left Iraq in the late 1950s for undergraduate studies in the UK, which was then the default destination for Iraqi exiles. They became active in Islamic student groups at their respective universities, which in 1962 jointly established the first formal nationwide organisation of its kind, FOSIS (Federation of Student Islamic Societies). Because of the composition of the student population in the UK, FOSIS was a meeting place for students of Arab and South Asian

⁴⁴ Aslan 2014.

⁴⁵ Atacan 1993; Schiffauer 2000. Although he hailed from Eastern Turkey, Kaplan was not Kurdish and had no particular affinity with Kurds and there were few Kurds among his followers. Once, in 1989, he did engage in a discussion with the pro-democracy Islamist journal *Girişim*, which was run mostly by Kurds. On this exchange, see Metiner 2004, pp. 335-49.

⁴⁶ Merley 2009, pp. 9-10. Apart from Jamal Barzinji, whose name indicates that he hailed from a prominent Kurdish family of scholars and Sufis, their ethnic identity is not clear and they probably found it irrelevant themselves. Some sources have it that Totonji was Baghdad-born.

Islamist backgrounds with Muslim students from other countries. It has remained an important institution to this day.⁴⁷

FOSIS and MSA constitute the nucleus of a world-wide transnational network of Western-educated and Muslim Brotherhood-aligned activists and intellectuals, which became a crucial component of the global Islamic movement. Universities in the West, especially the UK and the USA, have constituted a major arena for the dissemination of Muslim Brotherhood ideology and the organisation of an international following. Many young people from Muslim majority countries made their first acquaintance with the Brotherhood and were recruited into it while studying in the West.

The MSA spawned a whole series of other initiatives, including the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). Later, Barzinji and possibly also al-Talib were involved in the founding of two major US-based Muslim professional associations that became quite influential, AMSE (Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers, 1969) and AMSS (Association of Muslim Social Scientists), and a host of other institutes and associations.⁴⁸

These student activities in the West were neither the only nor the first form of Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Islamic activism in the international arena. Following the suppression of the Brotherhood in Egypt, Iraq and Syria in the 1950s, many leading members went into exile. Most of them ended up in Saudi Arabia, which felt threatened by Nasser's Arab socialism and the rise of revolutionary movements elsewhere in the region and perceived the Muslim Brothers as useful allies. Saudi Arabia offered them asylum and was for several decades to support the spread of Brotherhood literature to other parts of the world. Smaller numbers chose exile elsewhere, most notably Said Ramadan (the son-in-law and close collaborator of Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna), who is credited with establishing the first Brotherhood network in continental Europe from his bases in Munich and Geneva.

In 1962 the Saudi rulers established the first major Pan-Islamic organisation, the Muslim World League (*Rabitat al-'Alam al-Islami*, for short just *Rabita*), inviting a group of prominent Muslim scholars and activists, including several leading Muslim Brothers (including Said Ramadan and Iraq's al-Sawwaf) as co-founders.⁴⁹ The Saudis' primary aim in establishing the *Rabita* was to gather international support against the threat of Nasser's

⁴⁷ On FOSIS, see Bowen 2014, Chapter 5: 'The Muslim Brotherhood: the Arab Islamist exiles'. Bowen speaks of a 'joint effort by the Arab Muslim Brothers, the South Asian Jamaat-e-Islami activists and Malaysian Islamists.' The importance of FOSIS as a channel of Muslim Brotherhood ideology and practices to Malaysia is underlined by one of the best studies of the Islamic movement in Malaysia, Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah 1997, pp. 230-31.

⁴⁸ Merley 2009 p. 12. The obituary by al-Arian (2015) names the numerous institutions in which Barzinji was involved.

⁴⁹ The list of names of those present at the founding conference includes the Egyptian Said Ramadan (then based in Geneva), the Iraqi Muhammad Mahmud al-Sawwaf (then in exile in Pakistan), the Syrian Muhammad al-Mubarak, and from Pakistan Abul A'la Maududi, the *amir* of the Jamaat-i Islami, besides many others (Schulze 1990, pp. 186-7; Özcan 1962, p. 13).

revolutionary Arab socialism and his support of left-wing insurrections. Two decades later, the Saudis were to mobilise the *Rabita* against the threat from revolutionary Iran. Through the *Rabita*, the Saudis have funded mosques, Islamic centres and various activities throughout the world. Until the Saudis turned against the Brotherhood in the 1990s, it exerted a major influence in Saudi universities and the *Rabita* was a major channel for the dissemination of Brotherhood literature beyond the Arab world. Turkish translations of books by Sayyid Qutb and other Ikhwan, for instance, were first published by Salih Özcan, the *Rabita*'s chief representative in Turkey.⁵⁰

The student activism of FOSIS and MSA yielded a similar but more dynamic form of transnational Islamist activism. Ahmad Totonji, the most internationally active of the three Iraqi students mentioned above, helped establishing the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations (IIFSO) in 1969. Together with Jamal Barzinji, he further consolidated the transnational network by taking part in founding WAMY, the World Association of Muslim Youth, in 1972. WAMY, the Muslim answer to the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), had offices in Riyadh and received lavish Saudi funding. Like the *Rabita*, it has acted as a channel through which Saudi Arabia distributed patronage and attempted to spread its influence, but unlike the *Rabita*, it remained long dominated by Western-educated Brothers.

From their transnational vantage point, WAMY also made efforts to further stimulate the Islamic movement in Muslim-majority countries. Ahmad Totonji was especially close to the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) and its leader Anwar Ibrahim, whom he frequently visited. He played a significant role in persuading Anwar and his friends to join the UMNO government in 1982, which allowed them to embark on a program of Islamisation from above.⁵¹ For a decade and a half, Malaysia was a showcase of modernist state Islamisation. WAMY established offices in Kuala Lumpur and the government established an International Islamic University (IIUM) that became an important hub for the global Islamic movement. Many students and lecturers from Turkey and Iraq, including quite a few Kurds, spent years at IIUM, alongside colleagues from South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Arab world.

In 1980 WAMY organised a large international youth conference in Çanakkale in Turkey, co-sponsored by the country's Youth and Sports Ministry, with some 150 delegates from 42 countries. For Edip Yüksel, the Istanbul-based Kurdish Islamist activist, this was the first occasion to meet some of the great names of the Muslim Brotherhood, including its semi-

⁵⁰ Yüksel 2015, p. 328. On the *Rabita* and Salih Özcan's other activities, see the journalistic investigation by Uğur Mumcu (1987, 1994). Özcan's Hilal Yayınları also held a monopoly of translations of Maududi's works; see his biography: Özer 2011, pp. 157-64.

⁵¹ On Totonji in Malaysia: Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah 1997, pp. 230-31; on ABIM and Muslim Brotherhood influences: Zulkifly Abdul Malek 2011; on Malaysia's Islamisation program: Nasr 2001, especially Chapter 6.

official spokesperson in the UK, Kamal Helbawy, and the famous Yusuf Qaradawi (whose book *Halal and Haram* he had as a student sold among his friends).⁵²

From the mid-1980s onward, the said Egyptian Kamal Helbawy together with the Pakistani Khurshid Ahmad of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester (who had translated Maududi into English) ran, as a joint Brotherhood-Jamaat-i Islami initiative, a coordination committee that organised periodical meetings of senior Muslim Brotherhood figures and leading politicians from around the world, including Necmettin Erbakan and Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim. Many young British Muslims became acquainted with Brotherhood luminaries such as Sudan's Hasan Turabi and Tunisia's Rachid Ghannouchi through meetings organised by the same people.⁵³

The activists of this transnational network differed from earlier generations of Muslim Brothers but stayed within the parameters of the movement laid down by al-Banna. Many were, like the three Iraqi pioneers, trained as engineers or scientists, but there were also lawyers, medical doctors and social scientists. Their political and intellectual mindset was shaped by the writings of al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Maududi and other Brothers such as the Syrians Mustafa al-Siba'i and Said Hawwa, the Lebanese Fathi Yakan and the Qatar-based Yusuf al-Qaradawi. They followed the Brotherhood's method of *tarbiya* (training and indoctrination) in *usra* ('family' or cell: small groups with strong social control) and slow, step-by-step accession to membership.⁵⁴

Although most knew Arabic, English became the language of communication in these circles, facilitating the expansion of this network beyond the Arab world. In the context of its Arab home countries, the Brotherhood's ideals of Islamic universalism were tempered by a sense of Arab solidarity if not nationalism. The rapidly expanding transnational network of Muslim professionals, often referring to themselves as 'the Islamic movement', was more cosmopolitan, which made it easier to connect with Muslim professional middle classes living in the West as well as Asia and Africa. Their primary loyalty was to the Islamic movement, not to any nation or ethnic group. To the Iraqi pioneers in this network, it did not matter whether they were Kurd or Arab or Turkmen. Conversely, this transnational network had no noticeable impact on Kurds in Kurdistan, not even the educated middle classes.

⁵² Yüksel 2015, pp. 324-30. Kamal Helbawy was one of WAMY's founders in 1972 and its executive director during 1973-80.

⁵³ Innes Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: inside British Islam*, London: Hurst, 2014, pp. 106-7 (based on an interview with Helbawy). The spiritual leader of Indonesia's Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), Hilmi Aminuddin, told me he regularly attended these meetings and had got to know both Erbakan and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan there (interview, 2 November 2008).

⁵⁴ These methods are discussed extensively by Khalil al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood: Religion, Identity, and Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, and Hazem Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. Kandil remarks that the methods he observed in different class and national contexts were remarkably similar.

Kurdish, Islamist and transnational: the Islamic Party of Kurdistan (Partiya Islamiya Kurdistanî)

An ephemeral Kurdish Islamic movement that appeared to be influenced by many of the movements discussed so far, that was also transnational, with offices in three continents, but that unlike the Muslim Brotherhood considered Kurdish identity as a significant and important factor was the Islamic Party of Kurdistan (Partiya Islamiya Kurdistanî or PIK). The PIK was mostly active in the diaspora but appeared to have some grassroots support in various parts of Turkish Kurdistan. For that reason it has sometimes been considered as a precursor of Turkey's Hizbullah, from which it differed, however, in also having Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish members, being represented among Kurmanji as well as Sorani speakers. It was, in fact, one of the very few pan-Kurdish formations.

There has been some mystification concerning the origins of this party, which in several otherwise reliable Turkish studies has been presented as a sort of Kurdish breakaway section of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Both Faik Bulut and Ruşen Çakır claim, probably on the basis of the same Turkish intelligence reports, that Said Hawwa played a role in the establishment of this party at some convention in Saudi Arabia in 1980 and wrote its entire program. They erroneously believed that Hawwa was himself a Kurd, and that other Syrian Kurdish Muslim Brothers followed him in joining the new Kurdish party.⁵⁵ It is beyond doubt that Said Hawwa's books inspired numerous Turkish and Kurdish Islamists, including Hizbullah. He was not a Kurd however and nothing in the PIK's own publications suggests that Hawwa had any involvement in it. And as observed above, Syrian Kurdish Brothers who could defect from the Brotherhood and join PIK simply did not exist.⁵⁶

The PIK's charter, regularly reprinted in its journal *Cûdî*, states that it was founded in 1980 and had as its primary aim "the legitimate rights of the Kurds and other peoples." It considered itself as part of the larger, international Islamic movement and sought close relations with all Islamic groups, especially those in "its own environment," i.e. Kurdistan. The Muslim Kurdish nation, it continued, constitutes a part of the world-wide Muslim *umma* and Muslim Kurdistan is part of the Muslim world. The Kurdish nation should, like other Muslim nations, have the right to self-government and control of its own, undivided land. Religious and ethnic minorities were promised full freedom of religion and culture. The terms of the charter are vague but seem to imply even willingness to accommodate with Kurdish unbelievers and secular political movements.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Bulut 1997, pp.323-4; Çakır 2001, p. 48. Bulut gives no source; Çakır mentions as his source the 1995 report of the parliamentary committee investigating political assassinations by unknown perpetrators (TBMM Faili Meçhul Cinayetler Araştırma Komisyonu 12.10.1995 tarihli rapor), which must have been based on police reports. The same error found its way into later studies, including Kurt 2017.

⁵⁶ See the observations on Syrian Kurds and the Brotherhood in note 3.

⁵⁷ The charter, in Turkish, was reprinted in many issues of *Cûdî*. An archived copy is available online at

The PIK never became a mass movement but there was a brief period, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it regularly made its presence known. In the spring of 1990, the Turkish police announced the arrest of 33 PIK activists, aged between 19 and 47, in Istanbul, Ankara and Malatya. Most had studied in medreses in Syria or Iran – one of them was in fact an Iranian national – and some had received armed training in Afghanistan. The police also captured a small number of firearms, some money, and a pile of copies of the journal *Cûdî*, printed in Germany. The group was believed to strive for “the establishment of an independent Kurdish state based on Islamic principles.”⁵⁸ In Iraqi Kurdistan, the PIK claimed to be co-operating closely with Mela Osman Abdulaziz’s Islamic Movement of Kurdistan. One Islamic scholar active in this IMK, Mela Omar Gharib, was in fact also the chairman of the PIK’s *shura* council and thereby its highest religious authority.⁵⁹

The PIK’s leadership and prominent supporters consisted mainly of professionals based in the diaspora. Mela Omar Gharib was presumably based in Iraqi or Iranian Kurdistan; the other prominent Islamic scholar, Muhammad Salih Mustafa Gaburi, originally from Turkish Kurdistan, lived permanently in Riyadh, where he taught *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis) at the university. Gaburi frequently travelled to North America and Western Europe. The most prominent spokesperson in the West was the US-based physicist Muzaffar Partowmah, a Kurd from Sanandaj in Iran. In the early years of the Islamic Republic, Partowmah had been a special advisor to Iran’s first president Bani Sadr and had attempted (unsuccessfully) to mediate between the new regime and autonomy-seeking Kurdish groups. After the fall of Bani Sadr, he resettled in the USA. According to Youssef Nada, who had dealings with Bani Sadr and Partowmah in Iran, the latter was in fact a Muslim Brother.⁶⁰ The PIK’s journal *Judî*, which was published from Ann Arbor, Michigan from 1982 to 1990 (or later), carried statements by US-based professionals with profiles similar to those of the Muslim Brotherhood’s transnational network discussed in the previous section.

Around 1990, the centre of PIK shifted to West Germany, where there was a large Kurdish community, predominantly consisting a labour migrants. The PIK held its first international Islamic Conference in Cologne, Germany, in January 1990.⁶¹ The periodical *Judî*, which was in Arabic and English with some contributions in Kurmanji and Sorani Kurdish, was complemented or replaced by one of the same name (*Cudî*) in Turkish and Kurmanji,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110714104816/http://www.mnyekta.com/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=1040>.

⁵⁸ Daily *Cumhuriyet*, 3 April 1990.

⁵⁹ Bulut 1997, p. 323. Omar Gharib contributed a series of articles to the American edition of *Judî* in 1989 and 1990.

⁶⁰ Nada / Thompson 2012, pp. 61-2.

⁶¹ Documents published in *Judî* vol.9 no.2 (Ann Arbor, March 1990) and *Cudî* no. 2 (Bochum, April 1990).

published in Germany.⁶² By the end of 1992, the PIK announced it had also opened an office in Peshawar in Pakistan, where it published a periodical in Arabic, *Kurdistan – al-Mujahada*, suggesting it was supported by a group of Iraqi Kurdish fighters with the Afghan Mujahidin.⁶³

Judging by its journal, the PIK was much more concerned with the Kurdish struggle than with the world-wide Islamic movement. The regimes of Turkey, Iraq and Iran were strongly criticised for their oppression of the Kurds, with the poison gas bombing of Halabja by Saddam Hussein's regime and the assassination of Ghassemlou and other KDP-I leaders by the Iranian regime as the most iconic events. The party showed some positive appreciation of the various secular Kurdish parties, cautiously kept a critical distance from Turkey's Hizbullah, and was openly critical when Hizbullah became embroiled in a violent conflict with the PKK. The PIK and the PKK, while acknowledging their ideological differences, showed one another more respect than was common between secular and Islamic actors.⁶⁴

The PIK appears to represent a moment of transition in Kurdish Islamism, from the rejection of nationalism or even pride in ethnic identity as un-Islamic and an exclusive focus on the entire *umma* (implicitly led by the Arab older brother) to an awareness that the *umma* was made up of many different peoples who did not all enjoy equal rights and that in the pursuit of their national rights Kurdish Islamists needed to join hands with other Kurdish groups. The memoirs of Yakup Aslan, the Kurdish Islamist activist from Turkey mentioned above, are illustrative in this respect. While in Tehran, where he worked with Shi'ite revolutionaries, he was eager to meet fellow Kurds and travelled to Pawe, where he had heard there was a group of Kurdish Sunni revolutionaries, the Lashkar-i Musalman-i Kurd. They were Iraqi Kurds, who received money and arms from the Iranian government (this was during the Iran-Iraq war, obviously). They asked him why he and his friends in Turkey did not take up arms against the oppressive regime, as the PKK did. They were not persuaded by his argument that – in agreement with the moderate mainstream of the Muslim Brotherhood – the proper Islamic way was to change society through *da'wa*, predication, rather than violent revolution. His hosts told him that there were PKK guerrillas just across the border. Barzani's KDP, further north, had refused to give them shelter but the Islamists had invited them to stay in a

⁶² *Judî* was published in Ann Arbor, Michigan, from 1982 onwards. The last issue I have seen was vol. 9 no. 3 of May 1990, in which the Turkish-Kurmanji successor was announced. The first issue of *Cudî*, published quarterly in Bochum in Germany, appeared in January 1990.

⁶³ In an interview in *Cudî* no. 8 (June 1992), Partowmah mentions the party's "third office" in Peshawar (after those in the US and Germany). The magazine *Kurdistan – al-Mujahada* is announced in *Cudî* no. 9 (November 1992).

⁶⁴ A long interview with Salih Gaburi by the daily *Özgür Gündem*, reprinted in *Cudî* no. 9 (November 1992), pp. 11-16, is exemplary for the mutual understanding between these two Kurdish parties. Kurdish Islamists were aware that PKK leader Öcalan had by that time adopted a more positive attitude towards religion, perceiving that it was not only used effectively to protect vested interests but also allowed a revolutionary interpretation supporting liberation struggles (Öcalan 1989; 1993).

valley along the border that they controlled. They even had given them some of the arms and money they had themselves received from Iran.⁶⁵

From Islamic universalism to explicitly Kurdish Islamism

The PIK was a minor organisation that never mobilised large numbers, but its emergence marks an interesting transition in Islamist politics among the Kurds. Islamism and Kurdish nationalism had long seemed mutually incompatible convictions. Many Kurdish nationalists were privately pious persons but did not see a central role for religion in politics. All Kurdish nationalist movements were secular. Conversely Kurdish Islamists accused nationalists of placing nation and fatherland above God; to them, ethnic difference was insignificant compared with the distinction between true believers and the misguided, *haqq* and *batil*. Kurdish Islamists were typically active in parties and movements of the countries of their residence, used the state language and accepted, if grudgingly, Arab or Turkish supremacy in the movement. The political upheavals of the 1980s constitute a breaking point, when we see the emergence of specifically Kurdish Islamist movements and parties, which increasingly use Kurdish in their communications and proudly associate themselves with Kurdish culture and traditions.

The first of these movements was Moftizade's Maktab-i Qur'an, but because there was no prior all-Iranian Sunni movement and Iran was predominantly Shi'a, Moftizade did not have to make the choice between Iranian and Kurdish language, culture and social networks. In fact, it was only later, after the Iranian revolution, that he broadened the scope of his political activities to embrace all Sunni communities and established SHAMS, the Council of the Sunnis of Iran. The surviving factions of Maktab-i Qur'an are both more cohesive and more socially rooted than SHAMS. The Jama'at-i Da'wat wa Irshad, strongly influenced by Maududi's Islamist thought, never was as appreciative of Kurdish culture and tradition as the Maktab-i Qur'an, and the official faction led by Pirani is even less 'Kurdish' than the Jama'at was in Sobhani's time. The Rahimi-Mardokhi faction, on the other hand, has become more 'Kurdish' – although it is not clear what this means in terms of political action.

The most fascinating case is perhaps that of Turkey's Hizbullah, which in the mid-1990s was engaged in open war with the PKK and was fiercely opposed to (secular) nationalism but also was, in membership and organisational culture, a very Kurdish organisation.⁶⁶ Hizbullah's

⁶⁵ Aslan 2014, pp. 284, 290-2. The chronology is not clear; Aslan does not mention when he was in Pawe; this may have been in the late 1980s, for Aslan mentions that the PKK had modified its anti-religious stance. According to an Iraqi Kurdish Islamist source, the Lashkar-i Islami was a relatively marginal group whose importance was exaggerated by Iran for propagandistic reasons (Germiyani 1992, p. 142). Mofidi also suggests the group visited by Aslan must have been the Lashkari Islamiy Kurd, led by Aziz Shabak (Shahin), which was briefly active in the region during 1980-81 (personal communication).

⁶⁶ The most informative studies of Hizbullah are Çakır 2001 and Kurt 2015. On the Kurdish character of Hizbullah, see also van Bruinessen 2016.

founder, Huseyin Velioğlu, was much influenced by Said Hawwa's books and may have had personal contacts with Syrian Muslim Brothers who fled to Turkey. The Iranian revolution became, however, a more pervasive influence. Like many others in Turkey, Velioğlu was fascinated by Ali Shariati's writings and admired Iran's militant clergy. He spent much time in Iran in the early 1980s, allegedly receiving political and military training. It was there that he conceived of a new type of Islamic movement, grafted on the Kurdish *medrese* tradition, siding with the *mustaz'af*, the poor and oppressed, instead of the conservative middle class that was the mainstay of Turkish Islamism. Leading roles should be played by the Kurdish counterpart to Iran's militant Islamic scholars, the *mela* and *seyda* (mullahs), who were close to the *mustaz'af*. The books by Said Hawwa would be helpful to their political education.⁶⁷

Hizbullah's membership was almost exclusively Kurdish, and the role Islamic bookstores played as nodes in its social networks suggests that most of its activists had a *medrese* or *imam-hatip* school background. Due to its ideological radicalism and the violence in which it engaged (not only against the PKK, but also against rival Islamic groups), its popular appeal remained limited. Some years after the violent death of Velioğlu and the arrest of the entire remaining leadership in 2000, Hizbullah resurfaced as a civil society association, the Mustazaflar Derneği, which engaged in charitable activities, media outreach and organising mass meetings. In its efforts to reach out to a broader grassroots constituency, Hizbullah ever more strongly appealed to Kurdish culture and traditions. Its television station and print media addressed their audience as Kurds and more often than not in Kurdish rather than Turkish. By adopting Shaykh Said, the leader of the 1925 Kurdish uprising, into its pantheon of martyrs and organising public commemorations in his honour, it openly appealed to Kurdish national sentiment. Nationalism remained anathema to Hizbullah's leaders, however, and the PKK the arch-enemy. Hizbullah's broadening of its base stopped short of dialogue with secular nationalists.

Another group of Islamists who represent perhaps the clearest example of reorientation from Islamic universalism to the defence of Kurdish rights calls itself the Azadi Islamic Initiative. By its name, the group also refers to the Shaykh Said uprising, which was both Kurdish and Islamic. Azadi ('Freedom') was the name of the association of urban intellectuals that had planned the uprising. The Azadi Initiative aims to constitute a broad platform for all groups and movements (including secular ones) that strive for Kurdish rights, in order to form a common front against Ankara.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ These lines are based on Yakup Aslan's notes (2014, *passim*) on conversations with Velioğlu, whom he often met during his stay in Iran. One of Mehmet Kurt's informants attributes even more Kurdish separatist sentiment to Velioğlu, claiming he once said to him 'nothing will come from the Islamism of those Turks, of Erbakan and the MSP. We Kurds should unite under the banner of Islam and establish a state.' (Kurt 2015, p. 118; Eng. trl. p. 79).

⁶⁸ Author's conversations with Sıdkı Zilan and Yakup Aslan, 12 May 2014. See also the press report on the founding of the Azadi Initiative, <http://www.demokrathaber.net/guncel/islami-kurt-hareketi-yola-cikti-azadi-inisiyatif-h9338.html>.

In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, we have seen Kurdish Islamists break away from the Iraqi Brotherhood due to the oppressive and genocidal policies of Saddam Hussein's regime. It is not surprising that the gradual consolidation of Kurdish autonomy after 1991 and the relative stability of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) have favoured the consolidation of associations that consider the KRI rather than Iraq as a whole as their area of operations.

The various jihadist groups that found a base in the mountainous Hawraman region in the 1990s and early 2000s and that later merged into ISIS were ethnically mixed but had relatively small numbers of Kurdish Islamists among their members. The majority of Kurdish Islamists ultimately ended up in one of the two most significant associations, the Islamic Union of Kurdistan (Yekgirtû) and the Islamic Group (Komelî Îslamî). Both of these associations opted for integration in the KRI's political system and participation in regional elections. In the case of Yekgirtû, which represents the non-radical, gradualist stream of Muslim Brotherhood thought (although it appears not to be recognised as an affiliate by the Brotherhood), this is not surprising.

The change in Komelî Îslamî, which represented the fiercely anti-secular, Qutbist brand of Brotherhood thought, is more remarkable. In 1998, Ali Bapir still wrote that 'nationalism as a form of idolatry that is (...) incompatible with Islamic belief. In nationalism, the nation replaces God; therefore we consider it as *kufir* (unbelief).'⁶⁹ Earlier he had written of democracy that it 'may seem not to pose a problem for religion, but in reality it is a war against God; it is a form of atheism.'⁷⁰ In 2005, however, both Komelî Îslamî and Yekgirtû took part in elections for the regional parliament, the former as an independent party, the latter as part of an alliance with the two leading secular parties. In 2009, Komelî Îslamî contested the elections as part of an alliance with Yekgirtû and two small secular parties.⁷¹ Clearly, the changing political circumstances had also affected the views of Ali Bapir and his friends on democracy and Kurdish nationalism. In an interview in 2009, Bapir told me that he read all the great Islamist authors but was convinced it made no sense to speak of an Islamic system in the abstract, because every society has its specific history and political context. Kurdish society needs a political theory and practice that do justice to the specific Kurdish situation. Any Islamic model for the state will need to answer questions about the relations between the Kurdish people and the state, he said.⁷²

Secular Kurdish friends whom I told of this interview were unwilling to believe that Bapir had changed so much and thought he had hidden his true beliefs. But his party continued

⁶⁹ Cited in Obeid 2010, p. 82.

⁷⁰ Cited in Obeid 2010, p. 81.

⁷¹ Komelî Îslamî obtained 6 seats in the 111 seat parliament in 2005, 4 seats in 2009, and went on to 6 seats in 2013 and 7 seats in 2018. Yekgirtû took 9 seats in 2005, 6 seats in 2009, climbed to 10 seats in 2013, and fell to 5 seats in 2018. The IMK also once contested the elections, in 2009, obtaining 2 seats.

⁷² Author's interview with Ali Bapir, Erbil, 3 May 2009.

working within the existing system, using their legal status to gradually expand their influence at the grassroots. Between them, Komelî Islamî and Yekgirtû are believed to control the loyalties of the vast majority of Kurdish *mela* and ulama, which potentially gives them a more pervasive influence than can be measured by election results.

Conclusion

The strongest Kurdish political parties and movements, in all parts of Kurdistan, have been and remain secular. This fact alone makes Kurdistan quite different from its neighbouring countries, where Islamist formations have taken power or, as in Syria, have made a strong bid to overthrow the secular regime as well as the secular self-governing region of Rojava. Islamist groups and movements have gained strength among the Kurds too, but have undergone a reorientation, from rejection of Kurdish nationalism as divisive and incompatible with Islam to an assertion of concern for Kurdish rights as part and parcel of Islamic values. Kurdish Islamist parties and movements have become an important element of the political landscape in all parts of Kurdistan except Rojava (the Syrian part). While adopting some elements of the discourse of Kurdish nationalists on the one hand, they are on the other hand also influencing the latter's agenda and discourse, bringing in themes that are important to the pious segment of the common people. The most secular of the Kurdish movements, the PKK, has since the late 1980s been making conciliating gestures towards Islam and attempted to organise clerics and pious Kurds under its wings, culminating in the 2010s in various initiatives to mobilise vernacular Kurdish Islam as an alternative to state Islam.⁷³ Competition for the hearts and minds of the masses has obliged both Islamist and secular nationalist elites to show respect to, if not partially adopt, each other's ideas.

⁷³ This process is beyond the scope of this article. For good overviews, see Sarigil 2018 and Türkmen 2020.

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