

## Are the Kurds in Northern Iraq Truly Secular?

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The Kurds are predominantly Muslims, ultraconservative Sunni clerics, known as Salafists. The term Salafists originates from the Arabic word "salaf", which means ancestors. The Salafists advocate adherence to what they see as the original rules and teachings of Islam. Often, the Salafist clerics have studied in Saudi Arabia or other Gulf countries where a similar conservatism is dominant. As they return to northern Iraq, they start Salafist schools and mosques which receive funding from those Gulf countries.

The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK), a Kurdish Islamist political organization, was founded in 1987 by Sheik Osman Abdul Aziz. Prior to the creation of the IMK, Aziz from 1960-1980 was a prominent member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. He left Egypt in late 1980 and returned to northern Iraq.<sup>1</sup> In 1984, Aziz traveled to Iran, as the Iranian regime began to fund a variety of Kurdish groups in hopes of inciting domestic unrest in Iraq and thereby forcing Saddam Hussein into fighting on two fronts. In pursuit of this policy, Iran sent Aziz back to northern Iraq in 1987 to head the new (IMK).<sup>2</sup> After the 1991 Kurdish uprisings against Saddam Hussein, the increase of Kurdish Islamists began, under what was known as the Islamic Awakening, or the Kurdish mujahideen.<sup>3</sup> After unsuccessfully contesting the 1992 parliamentary elections, the IMK operated largely outside the framework of the joint Kurdish administration, focusing instead on developing and strengthening a separate administrative, political and military infrastructure in areas under its control, notably in Hawraman and Sharazur, which bordered the region controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In December 1993 tensions between the IMK and the PUK peaked in armed clashes in parts of Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk provinces. The IMK was forced to retreat to areas close to the border with Iran. The leadership left the eastern region altogether and for some months remained under the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) protection in Salahuddin. When increasing tensions between the KDP and the PUK deteriorated into armed clashes in May 1994, IMK forces fought alongside the KDP against the PUK. Eventually, the IMK leadership was able to return to its strongholds in Hawraman and Sharazur, and to establish its headquarters in the city of Halabja.<sup>4</sup>

Analysts categorize three generations of jihadists in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq: The Jihadi generation of the 1980s, that of Ansar al-Islam (Supporters of Islam) in the 2000s and that of the Kurds of Islamic State (ISIS) or Daesh in the 2010s. Ansar al-Islam, which was led by Mullah Krekar, illustrate Kurdish involvement in salafi and jihadi trends in the Iraqi Kurdistan area for decades. It is the most known Salafist group in Iraqi Kurdistan, who even went as far as establishing their own mini-state in 2001. Ansar al-Islam grew very quickly and had big influence.<sup>5</sup> Ansar al-Islam was born from the Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam). Scores of Iraqi Kurds affiliated to Ansar al-Islam, including key leaders, consider themselves veterans of the Afghan war.<sup>6</sup>

The Kurdish society is both tribal and very religious. The Kurds have consistently voted for what is perceived as secular political groups of the KDP and the PUK since the establishment of the

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1 <https://www.kfcris.com/en/view/post/45>

2 <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-movement-kurdistan>

3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salafism\\_among\\_Kurds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salafism_among_Kurds)

4 <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/mena/ansarbk020503.htm>

5 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salafism\\_among\\_Kurds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salafism_among_Kurds)

6 <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/mena/ansarbk020503.htm>

autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq in 1992. However, the Islamists hold 12 seats from the 100 seats Kurdish regional parliament (not counting the additional 11 seats assigned for the non-Kurds within the special quota seats). Having said that, we must understand that they Kurds within the KRI do not feel any threats from their neighbors in Iran (to the east), Turkey (to the north), Syria (to the west), and the federal Iraq (to the south) when it comes to religion since all of those nations are Muslims too. It is only for this reason that the Kurds vote for the KDP and PUK. It is interesting to know that even though the Kurds in Turkey are different compared to those in Iraq, still, forty percent (40%) of Kurds in Turkey voted for Islamist President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in recent elections.<sup>7</sup>

Since 1992, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has focused on building mosques. The unofficial number of mosques has reached around 12,000 mosques, exceeding the combined number of mosques present in the four Gulf countries of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Emirates. To build a mosque, all what is requested is the petition from 25 people. According to the KRG official data, the Kurdish region has close to 6,000 mosques with 3,380 of them offering Friday sermons. The Ministry of Endowments currently employs approximately 2,700 Islamic teachers (other figures give the number at 3,000 Imams), with some on a permanent basis and others on a contractual basis. According to the Ministry of Endowments data, it operates 100 centers for Koran memorization, 130 rooms for jurists, and 21 Islamic schools. Additionally, the Kurdistan Institute for Training Speakers, constructed in 2016, is also under the ministry's purview. The Kurdish region of northern Iraq is likely to face significant challenges in the future due to the presence of pro-Muslim brotherhood Islamic parties in the region who are trying to Islamize the people.<sup>8</sup>

Abu al-Hadi al-Iraqi, a Kurd from Mosul was a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War. al-Iraqi migrated to the Afghanistan-Pakistan area and became a leading figure in al-Qa`ida by the end of the 1990s. Among the training camps for residents of the al-Qa`ida guest house run by al-Iraqi was a 'Kurds Camp,' which, as its name suggests, was intended to train Kurdish jihadi operatives.<sup>9</sup> Knowing this fact, it is not surprising to know that the Iraqi Kurdish region has supplied ISIS (IS) with 2,000 jihadists. That was natural since Kurdish Jihadism has over 40 years of turbulent history in the Kurdish region, which emerged in 1980 as one of the consequences of changes in the Islamic movement in Kurdistan. The birth of which has its origins in the 1950s in the Kurdish town of Halabja.<sup>10</sup> According to Denise Natali, a former columnist for Al-Monitor, a distinguished research fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), National Defense University where she specializes on regional energy politics, Middle East politics and the Kurdish issue, the recruitment of Kurdish Jihadis for ISIS were under way under the KRG eyes. Two of the most influential of these cleric-recruiters were Imam Gailani from Sulaimaniyah and Mulla Shwan, a well-known mulla linked to a mosque in Arbil under the auspices of the KRG's Ministry of Religious Endowments. Mullah Shwan's defection to IS was particularly shocking because he was considered a moderate religious leader and friend to the KRG Ministry of Religious Endowments.<sup>11</sup>

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7 <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/89583>

8 [https://ekurd.net/mosques-built-iraqi-kurdistan-2023-03-28?fbclid=IwAR1W9KnVgKh06FOvWRUvz\\_Ln9Ilw9\\_swLFu8AhdKwGmheXFqKz03us0\\_jr8](https://ekurd.net/mosques-built-iraqi-kurdistan-2023-03-28?fbclid=IwAR1W9KnVgKh06FOvWRUvz_Ln9Ilw9_swLFu8AhdKwGmheXFqKz03us0_jr8)

9 <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-state-and-the-kurds-the-documentary-evidence/>

10 <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/three-generations-jihadism-iraqi-kurdistan?fbclid=IwAR0i2RnkqkufUCtNTIY9XbXqI1Iz45U9ufhz5Gh83-RRcOrNvFpayryaqw>

11 [https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/06/is-infiltration-iraqi-kurdistan.html?fbclid=IwAR0J928Jr1\\_ak1Mb5WQaKb60cs6-06WYgC1d5csS4s\\_XV0KOLwoTdwCwbcg](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/06/is-infiltration-iraqi-kurdistan.html?fbclid=IwAR0J928Jr1_ak1Mb5WQaKb60cs6-06WYgC1d5csS4s_XV0KOLwoTdwCwbcg)



While some argue that militant jihadi Salafism lacks collective support in the Kurdish region in Iraq (KRI); however, there is a growing number of non-militant forms of Salafism within the Kurdish region, which is on the rise in multiple forms.<sup>12</sup> For example, more than 12,000 women were killed in the name of honor in northern Iraq Kurdish region from 1991 to 2007, according to Aso Kamal of the DOAA Network Against Violence.<sup>13</sup> Another example that exemplify the sectarian and tribal nature of Kurdish society is the alarming rate of the female genital mutilation (FGM). Researcher Abdul Karim Sheikh Bezini links circumcision to the “*growing wave of religion that affected Kurdistan after the 1991 uprising. The researcher indicated that the KRG will not be able to directly confront these groups now*”. He stated, “*female circumcision stems from a tribal practice that is used among Kurdish families to kill the sexual desire among young girls to discourage them from premarital sex, ...*”<sup>14</sup> In fact, there is an actual reference to female genital mutilation (FGM) in Islamic scripture – Hadith, quoting the prophet as urging moderation when performed. Furthermore, the school of jurisprudence (Shafi’i) traditionally views it positively. Despite the ban of the practice, around 15,000 girls were circumcised in the Kurdistan Region in 2018 alone, according to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA).

The little liberal voices in the Kurdish region and the political groups that seem to be secular within the Kurdish region cannot face the Islamic and tribal nature of Kurdish society in general. On many occasions, the Kurdish leaders stand helpless to execute court decisions that go against tribal or Islamic leaders or institutions.

Journalist Cathrin Schaer writes that the Kurdish region in northern Iraq has been described as “the new Dubai”, but behind this propaganda, Kurdish society is falling apart, according to activist Kamal Chomani. Almost two-thirds of Kurdish households are on the public payroll, this way the Kurdish parties of the KDP and PUK secure the support of the people for these two political parties in elections.<sup>15</sup>

12 <https://www.dw.com/en/discontent-in-iraqi-kurdistan/a-59949609?fbclid=IwAR3MJ7aSwyZR1gBDDvSuQQv6LcgkfcOHMsz1wI7GCpOAYiGCa37MHDI62EE>

13 <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/world/middleeast/21honor.html>

14 <https://en.arij.net/investigation/female-circumcision-in-kurdistan/>

15 <https://www.dw.com/en/discontent-in-iraqi-kurdistan/a-59949609?fbclid=IwAR3MJ7aSwyZR1gBDDvSuQQv6LcgkfcOHMsz1wI7GCpOAYiGCa37MHDI62EE>