

Nationalism And Islamism In The Kurdistan Region Of Iraq – The Emergence Of The Kurdistan Islamic Union: A Critical Review

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Abstract

This article is a review of a book published in the Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics. The book under review, *Nationalism and Islamism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: The Emergence of the Kurdistan Islamic Union*, addresses timely and troubling issues in our democratic political discourse related in one way or another to the interface between religion and politics in the context of Islamic political parties. A diversity of specific topics is covered including Islam, religious nationalism, Kurdistan Region, democracy, and Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), pertinently in the shadow of Kurdistan’s lack of statehood. This review aims to explore the interconnection between all these concepts and most specifically the interrelationship of religion and nationalism and how it has been perceived and practiced by the Islamic political party called Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Finally, the book’s main thesis is briefly discussed, and conclusion is drawn on the implication of Islamic brand of religious nationalism in the Middle East in general and Kurdistan Region of Iraq in particular.

Keywords: Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), Islamism, Nationalism, Religious nationalism, Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU)

1. Introduction: Background of the Study

Religion and nationalism are both powerful and important markers of individual identity, but the relationship between the two has been a source of considerable debate [1-5]. Even though, we live in an increasingly secular society, in which religion has less and less influence on our daily lives, the events of 9/11 and their aftermath in Afghanistan and Iraq and the rise, birth, and defeat of Daesh or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) have shaken scholarly assumptions about the “end of history” and the post-Cold War peace dividend – and the study of religion and politics has suddenly emerged into the glare of public attention. Religion and politics as separate powerful entities are distinctly unquestionable forces for good [6-11]. They can also be – and throughout history – religion has been in liaison with politics – a force for abuse, coercion, terror, and war.

Over the first two decades of the 21st century, much effort has been expended to show emphatically that religion is alive and thriving in contravention of the much-vaunted secularization thesis of the twentieth century [12-18]. Speculation about these matters was fed by a rapidly expanding literature on everything from the causes of global terrorism and counter-terrorism struggles, the prospects for democracy in the Middle East, and the nature of Islamic beliefs. According to the annual assessment made by the Freedom House (2020), of the 192 countries around the world, two-thirds (121) are electoral democracies. Of the 47 countries with an Islamic majority, one-quarter (11) are electoral democracies [19-26]. Furthermore, none of the core Arabic-speaking societies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) falls into the category.

Given this pattern, it is commonly assumed that the Islamic publics have little faith in the principles of democracy preferring strong leadership and rule by traditional religious authorities to the democratic values of pluralistic competition, political participation, and political rights and civil liberties [27-34]. Alternative explanations of

radical Islamic fundamentalism suggest that the underlying root causes lie in deep disparities between rich and poor within societies, buttressed by the pervasive inequalities in political power in Middle Eastern regimes [35-41]. If this theory is applied to cultural contrasts between modern and traditional societies, it suggests that we would expect that shaky democratic values and economic inequality are central to the persistent religious presence in these societies.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Mohammed Salih Mustafa, the author of *Nationalism and Islamism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: The Emergence of the Kurdistan Islamic Union*, has examined the relation between Islamism and nationalism in the Middle East with the case study of Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) political party [42-46]. This book is also the first major scholarly book by a diaspora Kurdish scholar to undertake such an extensive study of religion and nationalism in this part of the world especially in a politically sensitive State-less Kurdistan. Mohammed's work is quite ambitious in that it tries to overcome the excessive focus of negativity on religious nationalism details. At the same time, it tries to avoid the overgeneralization we see in the flourishing political Islam research that tends to regard religious fanaticism as an explanatory factor. The major contribution of this book is that, while explaining the complex political and historical context in which the rise of religious nationalism took place in Middle East, it also materializes a specific case study that is highly relevant to Kurdistan.

2. Summarization

In this review, I will summarize each of the chapters to convey a sense of the rich diversity of the topics addressed and offer brief questions or critical remarks where they arise.

In the Preface (xi – xii) Mohammed begins with recounting his personal journey consisting of displacement from his beloved Kurdish village in Iraq, living in camps in a distant Iran, and when he came back to his homeland was enforced to learn the dominant language, Arabic, against his wishes. This constant move from one place to another against the wishes of a young man has been a traumatic experience. Finally, he lands in London and lived there for twenty years, but always yearning to come back to his homeland makes for poignant reading. In a sense, this book is a personal expression presented to the academia in the form of doctoral scholarship with the noble intention of undergoing rites of passage to personal healing and closure of his traumatic past.

The book is structured into seven chapters. The author begins the Introduction that is exclusive of these seven chapters, giving a brief background of the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU). He is blunt in stating that it is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), a reactionary group that arose in Egypt in 1928, to counter what it saw as a threat of Westernization and Secularization that the European involvement in the Middle East had brought to the region, which was having adverse influence on a predominant Muslim publics. The author situates his study to fill the gap in scholarship within the context of Kurdish nationalist movements (xiv). He delineates the aim of the study as to explore the principles and factors governing the spread and political impact of religious nationalism in the Middle East with the case study of KIU to substantiate his various claims (xiv). He is honest to affirm that KIU is not alone in Iraq and it faces stiff competition from Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) on similar ideological framework (xv). Hence, we come to understand that while IIP has federal agenda to propose religious nationalism based on Islamism, the KIU has similar agenda at the regional level.

In the first chapter entitled *Religious nationalism and Islam* (pp. 1-29), the author sets out to outline the theoretical framework of the study with extensive use of textual evidence based on authoritative references which are commendable. He informs us that KIU began as a political party in 1994 with an intention to participate in electoral democracy and struggle for an independent Kurdistan separate from present-day Iraq (2-3). His aim is to examine political phenomenon, that is, the intersection and interaction between religion and nationalism with Islamist

overture (5). He does this by exploring concepts such as: nation, nationalism, religion and nationalism, national identity, religious nationalism, neo-religious nationalism, Islam and nationalism, and Kurds and nationalism (1). Such extensive coverage of concepts helps the reader to get a fair understanding of Islamic religious nationalism. It also marks the book as a vast improvement over the ample scholarly discourse on Islamism, which has paid scant attention to the way in which Islamic nationalism operates and the values it embodies by discussing their operations by the focused case study of KIU, an Islamic political party.

In the second chapter, From embracing Islam to the dawn of religious nationalism (30-67), the author takes the onerous challenge to explore the historical events that made the Kurdish people embrace Islam. Prior to Islam, the Kurds were subjugated by the Persian Sassanid and later the Byzantine empires (32). Thus, the Kurds were neither politically nor religiously independent, and were longing for an opportunity that in time would fulfil their desire for political independence and continued religious freedom (32). Throughout history, though the Kurds experienced the golden age of Islam that helped them preserve their community and culture, due to the pan-Islamic caliphates they never thought of building a nation (64). He concludes the chapter saying that for Kurdish political parties the political platform is nationalism. The insight we draw from this chapter is that for Islamist Kurdish political parties especially KIU, Islam is at the service of nationalism and not vice versa.

The third chapter is entitled The de facto Kurdistan Region and the rise of religious nationalism (68-99). The author takes as his starting point the 1991 uprising (68) that was the aftermath of the weakening of Saddam Hussein regime due to his misadventure of invading Kuwait. Though the Kurdistan region found some semblance of autonomy from Baghdad, it had to face severe challenges from the brutal and repressive Saddam regime. The nascent region faced challenges of self-rule because they were not ready to take up neither governance of their own region and at the same time engage with a hostile federal regime under the iron fist of a dictator. The KIU was unprepared for such an eventuality since it was in the business of preaching and had no clear political vision (97). The author's analysis states that this political vision ultimately evolved into a religious nationalism (97). Applying the dynamics of electoral democracy, we can fairly say that the KIU has not been able to sway the Kurdish electorate after its transition from a preaching organization to an Islamic political party since it has not been able to dislodge existing secular parties from capturing legislative political power to rule the KRI.

The fourth chapter termed as Islam and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (100-126) forcefully argues that the KIU evolved from a traditional Islamic religious group to a political party with nationalistic agenda but based on the tenets of Islam (100). It has reconciled with the contradictions between what Islam as a religion stand and their aspirations for the future Kurdish nation. The author in his interviews with top leaders of KIU found that they do not accept the traditional interpretations of universalized Islam (umma), Islamic caliphates, the Muslim Brotherhood, sacredness of Sharia, preaching and politics and above all Muslim-Muslim conflicts and rights (125). For them, the conservative interpretations of these key concepts are in sharp opposition to nationalism that they dutifully espouse for the Kurdish people. Like all politicians, they find their own novel solutions to intractable problems. The KIU claim that Islam rather than hindering their nationalist agenda is in fact boosting their nationalistic strife (125). We think it is hard to convince the sceptics especially within academia who are rather averse to religion intermingling with nationalism especially Islam.

The fifth chapter is a pertinent one to investigate the credentials of KIU regarding its political participation. The chapter is named Democracy and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (127-153). The author takes important variables to judge the KIU against the measures of democracy. The themes explored are democracy, theocracy or civil sovereignty, Islamism versus secularism, coexistence,

and the role of women. The KIU is aware of the nascent form of democracy that is presently found in some parts of the Middle East especially in Iraq post 2003. Since, democracy is struggling to find a foothold in a region known for dictatorships and caliphates, the KIU does not want to be an alternative to secular parties but wants to be a participant (134). Theocracy or civil sovereignty is the debate between religious nationalism and secular nationalism. The Islamists claim according to the author that “Islam by definition has come to eliminate any kind of theocracy, and it strives for a social contract that leads to a civil sovereignty” (139). This could be sweet words for the secularists. In the debate about Islamism versus secularism, the KIU wants to avoid dividing the society into seculars and Islamists (140). The author is of the opinion that, “The extremism from Islamist and secular, has badly harmed the political situation in the Middle East... Ideology and bigotry are the main factors hindering the political parties in the Middle East from becoming popular” (141). We think this is fairly a right assessment of political parties not only in the Middle East but also in Kurdistan. On the issue of coexistence, the KIU has tried to distance itself from the “political parties in the Middle East who practice ideology, bigotry and intolerance” (145). They propose that they walk the moderate path centered on the notion of accepting others with tolerance and coexistence (145). Whether it is done by compulsion due to the ground reality or it is part of its ideology is something that we need to observe closely in the future. The KIU from its inception has included women not only as followers but have allowed them to participate in decision-making (150). The author contributes his insight on the role of the women saying: “Bringing women back into public life is extremely important in any Muslim society. The importance of this for a party like the KIU comes from two angles: the first is the correction of an idea that Muslim women cannot integrate into public life, and that any woman who wants to be publicly free needs to compromise her Islamic values” (151). Here lies the crux in modern secular age, whether women in Islamic countries can participate in politics and can be free of religious trappings especially from the ultra-conservatives. With respect to this set of issues, the Muslim world must adjust to these new realities, an adjustment that requires a transformation in Islamic thinking. Hence, it needs to be significantly reformed and winds of change needs to be ushered within its traditional institutions like the family and religio-political authorities.

The penultimate chapter six is termed, Nationalism and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (154-180). In this chapter, the author head-on challenges the top leadership of KIU through personal interviews to make their position clear as to whether they prioritize nationalism, or they lean towards Islamism. The answers are eye-openers. The leaders consistently maintain that Islamism and nationalism are not contradictory (155), but rather complementary. The KIU believes that nationalism and Islamism must be tied together to realize their goal of a Kurdish state that unifies the territories of the Kurds in Iraq. The KIU thinks this is the only way to convince their party members that the Islamic tie is an important one to build trust between themselves so that they can convince those brother nations in and around Kurdistan (160). One leading intellectual in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is of the opinion that KIU can work as a mediator in bringing together various factions within Kurdistan political landscape as well as close the chasm between Badinan and Soran regions (169) who are divided along linguistic and cultural lines. Through this chapter, the author concludes that KIU is not a fundamental, dogmatic Islamic party (178) rather it is using its Islamic credentials at the service of Kurdish nationalism. The KIU has reached a stage in its political journey where it is ready to put nationalists’ interests above its party interests (179). I think this is commendable for a party which is proud of its Islamic legacy.

Finally, the last and the shortest chapter seven is titled Conclusion (181-187). The author concludes that his intention to undertake this study was in addition to the dominant paradigm that defined religious nationalism as “the attempt to link religion and the nation-state” (181) there is another paradigm – religious nationalism, here Islamic nationalism that requires serious consideration by the scholars and policy makers. Specific to this study, he defines “religious nationalism” as the reconciliation of those religious movements that, at the outset, opposed the new nation

states, which they termed as a cause of fragmentation in the united body of the Islamic caliphate (181). Mohammed argues that as per this definition, religious nationalism consists of the combination of previous religious movements, or Islamist movements, and the nationalism that they initially opposed (181). The author strongly recommends that religious nationalism that has spawned in the Middle East is an antidote to radicalization and terrorism. The more Islamism is given space within the political landscape, the more it will transmute into nationalism and give its adherents scope to widen their political horizon. Time will tell us whether it will happen, or it will go into other direction spreading violence and terror within the region and exporting it globally.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Religious nationalism is the relationship of nationalism to a particular religious belief, dogma, or affiliation. This relationship can be broken down into two aspects: the politicization of religion and the influence of religion on politics. In the former aspect, a shared religion can be seen to contribute to a sense of national unity, a common bond among the citizens of the nation. Another political aspect of religion is the support of a national identity, similar to a shared ethnicity, language, or culture. The influence of religion on politics is more ideological, where current interpretations of religious ideas inspire political activism and action; for example, laws are passed to foster stricter religious adherence. We largely agree that Mohammed has been successful in addressing the fundamental aspects that constitute the subject of religious nationalism.

In total, *Nationalism and Islamism...* brims with insights on every other page. It shows how Kurdish society grounded in shareable religious culture is feasible, combining voices across the spectrum of political agency. The author is taking a side in the Islamic – secular debate, which is a debate about what kind of nationalism is acceptable when we think about the stability and security of Kurdistan. The book offers a thoughtful and balanced analysis of the political landscape of Kurdistan, but sceptics might doubt whether Islamism and secularism can coexist in an overcrowded and highly competitive political arena.

This book is a timely addition to the literature with its rich insights and innovative, path-breaking studies. Mohammed's most significant contribution to the debates in religious nationalism is the doctrine of 'Reconciliation.' According to this doctrine, the author calls the scholars to explore the possibility that religion and politics can mutually interact in a beneficial way in the service of nationalism. Each chapter, including the introduction and conclusion, challenges mainstream scholarship and shifts the focus from a narrow-minded ethno-national approach to calls instead to pay closer attention to local actors and agents who had largely gone ignored. Those actors and agents do – and likely will continue to – represent new Muslim communities that may play an active positive role in the future of the region. For these reasons, the book is a must-read and the exceptional and extensive bibliography and indexing makes it even more appealing and easy to follow. This feature is reason enough to read the book, for the reader unfamiliar with religious nationalism will gain more than a basic understanding of its dynamics. There is no doubt that this book will be a useful reference work on religious nationalism and Islamic nationalism in general and on Kurdistan Islamic Union in particular.

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