Faith, Identity, and Politics: An Analysis of the Kurdish Relationship with Islam

I. Introduction

The Kurdish people, numbering between 30 and 45 million, constitute one of the largest stateless nations in the world, primarily inhabiting a mountainous region known as Kurdistan, which spans southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northern Syria.[1] Central to understanding Kurdish history, culture, and contemporary politics is their complex and multifaceted relationship with Islam. While it is accurate that the majority of Kurds identify as Sunni Muslims, predominantly following the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence [1], this fact merely scratches the surface of a rich and diverse religious landscape. This landscape includes significant communities of Shia Muslims, particularly the Feyli Kurds [1], adherents of Alevism, a syncretic faith with roots in Islam but possessing distinct practices [1], followers of ancient, indigenous belief systems like Yezidism and Yarsanism (also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Kaka'i) which retain pre-Islamic elements [1], a historical and resurgent Christian presence [11], and observable trends towards secularism and non-affiliation.[5]

A common, though potentially misleading, characterization suggests that Kurds "hold their Islam lightly" [15], perhaps stemming from historical experiences of oppression by fellow Muslims or the persistence of pre-Islamic cultural elements.[15] However, this perception risks obscuring the profound and enduring influence Islam has exerted on Kurdish society, culture, traditions, social structures, and political movements for over thirteen centuries.[16] Islam has not only shaped personal piety but has also provided frameworks for social organization, intellectual life, and political mobilization throughout Kurdish history.

This report aims to provide a nuanced, historically grounded analysis of the intricate relationship between the Kurdish people and Islam. It will explore the historical processes of Islamization, delineate the various branches of Islam and other belief systems present among Kurds, examine the significant role of Sufism, analyze Islam's impact on Kurdish culture and identity, investigate the interplay between religion and politics within Kurdish nationalism, and compare these dynamics across the different regions of Kurdistan. Ultimately, the report seeks to move beyond simplistic generalizations and illuminate the complexity and diversity that characterize the Kurdish experience with Islam. The very religious heterogeneity of the Kurds, encompassing orthodox Sunni Islam, heterodox Islamic traditions, distinct pre-Islamic derived faiths, and secular outlooks, is itself a defining feature. This diversity has historically been a source of both internal tension and, arguably, a foundation for a unique culture of tolerance and coexistence, particularly evident in regions like Iraqi Kurdistan which have served as havens for persecuted minorities.[8] Understanding this complex religious tapestry is crucial for comprehending Kurdish identity and the political dynamics shaping their past, present, and future.

II. The Advent and Consolidation of Islam in Kurdistan

A. Pre-Islamic Religious Landscape

Before the arrival of Islam in the 7th century, the religious landscape of the Kurdish territories was diverse, primarily shaped by belief systems stemming from western Iranic traditions. The majority of Kurds adhered to faiths described as pre-Zoroastrian, deriving directly from ancient Indo-Iranian religious roots.[4] These often involved elements later characterized by outsiders as pagan or Magian practices.[4] While distinct from Zoroastrianism, the broader influence of Zoroastrian thought on Iranian culture, of which Kurds are a part, was significant and left lasting traces.[1]

Crucially, elements of these ancient faiths did not vanish with the advent of Islam but persisted, often syncretizing with newer beliefs. This continuity is evident in the survival and characteristics of Yezidism, Yarsanism, and Kurdish Alevism, all of which contain discernible elements derived from these older Iranic traditions.[7] This layering of religious traditions, rather than a simple replacement, suggests a cultural resilience among Kurdish communities and a tendency towards syncretism that would also influence the later adoption and practice of Islam. The pre-Islamic religious environment was not monolithic; alongside these Iranic faiths, parts of Kurdistan also hosted communities practicing Judaism and Christianity. Notably, the royal house of Adiabene, a Kurdish kingdom centered around modern-day Arbil, converted from Judaism to Christianity by the early 5th century AD.[11] Early Christian presence was established in central Kurdistan and parts of Anatolia well before the 7th century.[11] This pre-existing religious diversity and the demonstrated capacity for adaptation and syncretism likely shaped how different Kurdish groups encountered and eventually integrated Islam.

B. The Initial Spread of Islam (7th Century)

The first significant contact between the Kurdish people and Islam occurred within the context of the early Muslim conquests in the 7th century AD. As Arab Muslim armies expanded out of the Arabian Peninsula, they encountered Kurdish tribes during the conquest of Mesopotamia in 637 AD and the subsequent subjugation of the Sasanian Persian Empire.[4] At this time, the Kurds were a significant element within the Sasanian Empire, often inhabiting strategic mountainous regions, and they initially offered strong support to the Sasanians in their attempts to resist the Muslim advance between 639 and 644 AD.[4] The initial interaction was thus framed by military conflict, positioning the Kurds largely as adversaries aligned with the failing Persian power.

Despite this initial opposition, the historical record also points to very early individual conversions among Kurds. Figures such as Jaban al-Kurdi and his son Meymun al-Kurdi are traditionally considered among the first Kurds to embrace Islam, with some accounts suggesting they also acted as missionaries among their people.[4] Khalil al-Kurdi as-Semmani is noted as one of the first Kurdish Tabi'un (followers of the Prophet Muhammad's companions).[4] The existence of these early converts indicates that alongside the broader military and political conflict, individual interactions, choices, and perhaps peaceful proselytization were also occurring, influenced by the rapidly shifting political landscape as Sasanian authority crumbled.

C. Processes of Islamization: Conversion Dynamics

The narrative surrounding the conversion of the Kurds to Islam is contested, reflecting complex historical processes and potentially divergent later interpretations. One dominant

account suggests that mass conversion occurred relatively early, specifically during the caliphate of Umar ibn Al-Khattab (634-644 AD).[4] According to this view, as the defeat of the Sasanian Empire became increasingly certain, Kurdish tribal leaders pragmatically chose to submit to the victorious Muslim armies and accept Islam, with their respective tribe members following their lead.[4] Some sources further suggest that by the 8th century, the majority of Kurds had embraced Islam, crucially doing so without undergoing Arabization, implying that any earlier resistance was rooted in social or political factors rather than a fundamental rejection of the religion itself.[4]

However, a compelling counter-narrative, supported by various historical accounts and contemporary perspectives, emphasizes a much more protracted, coercive, and resisted process of Islamization. Sources describe the early conquests involving Arab armies sweeping through territories with the aim to "convert and or tax everyone they could find".[26] Historical texts recount instances where Kurdish groups were explicitly invited to embrace Islam, and upon refusal, faced demands for the capitation tax (jizya) under the threat of military action.[26] Accounts exist of battles fought against resisting Kurds, resulting in killings, enslavement of children, and the taking of spoils.[26] Medieval Islamic historians like Ibn Athir refer to "polytheist Kurds" being killed and enslaved for rejecting Islam.[26] This perspective argues that the Islamization of the majority of Kurds was not a swift event but a gradual process spanning centuries, possibly not reaching completion until the mid-Abbasid era (9th-10th centuries) or even significantly later in certain regions.[26]

Evidence for this prolonged timeline includes reports of non-Muslim Kurdish communities persisting in remote mountain areas well into the 13th century, occasionally raiding Muslim settlements.[4] Furthermore, specific accounts suggest that many Kurmanji-speaking tribes, particularly those in areas where Yezidism was prevalent, remained largely non-Muslim until much more recently. Some tribal narratives claim conversion occurred only around 300 years ago, driven by the political calculations of tribal chiefs seeking to gain power and influence within the changing regional dynamics.[26] The persistence of distinct non-Islamic faiths like Yezidism and Yarsanism, which resisted full assimilation into Islam despite centuries of coexistence and pressure, further supports the notion of an uneven and incomplete Islamization process.

Therefore, the historical reality of Kurdish conversion to Islam appears far more complex and varied than a simple narrative of early, voluntary mass acceptance suggests. It was likely a heterogeneous process, differing significantly across regions, tribes, and time periods. Factors such as military conquest, coercion, the imposition of taxes on non-Muslims, the political pragmatism of tribal leaders, geographical isolation allowing for resistance, and genuine religious appeal all played a role. The Islamization of Kurdistan unfolded over centuries, characterized by periods of conflict, accommodation, and gradual assimilation, leaving a lasting legacy of religious diversity.

D. The Role of Madrasas in Kurdish Society and Islamic Learning

Following the spread of Islam, madrasas (Islamic schools or colleges) emerged as pivotal institutions in shaping a new form of civilization across Kurdistan.[22] The first known Kurdish madrasa was established around the mid-10th century (c. 950s) in Hamadan, located in what

is now Iranian Kurdistan.[22] These institutions served not merely as centers for religious instruction but evolved into hubs of broader intellectual and cultural life.

A significant development occurred under the influence of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin), the renowned Muslim leader of Kurdish origin. Saladin is credited with transforming the educational scope of madrasas under his influence, expanding the curriculum beyond purely Islamic sciences. While Tafsir (Quranic exegesis), Hadith (Prophetic traditions), and Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) remained central, subjects such as Logic, Statute (possibly law or governance), Mathematics, Astronomy, Medicine, and Philosophy were also incorporated.[22] This suggests a period where Kurdish madrasas fostered a holistic approach to knowledge, integrating religious and worldly sciences.

Furthermore, Saladin reportedly gave greater importance to Kurdish lessons within these institutions.[22] While the primary language of scholarship and most textbooks was Arabic, reflecting the broader Islamic intellectual world, these texts were translated into Kurdish by educators and experts for use in the madrasas.[22] This practice highlights the role of madrasas in preserving and developing the Kurdish language within an Islamic educational framework.

The social importance of these institutions is underscored by the reported custom among Kurds where there was an obligation for at least one child in each household to receive education in a madrasa, although access was predominantly male (around 80% of students).[22] The intellectual contributions stemming from this environment are evidenced by notable early Kurdish Islamic scholars, poets, and authors such as Bassami Kurdi (9th century), Evdilsemedê Babek (10th-11th century), Ali Hariri (11th century), the female scholar and calligrapher Fakhr-un-Nisa (11th-12th century), and the geographer and historian Abulfeda (13th-14th century).[22] The legacy of these institutions persisted; even after the secularization of Turkey in the 20th century, Turkish Kurdistan was seen by some as a last stronghold of traditional Islamic education, attracting Turkish Muslim scholars seeking proper Islamic schooling.[4]

In essence, Kurdish madrasas were far more than just religious seminaries. They functioned as crucial centers for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, the cultivation of broader intellectual pursuits, the development of Kurdish literary culture, and the social integration of Kurdish society within the wider Islamic world.[17] Their historical significance lies in their role as nodes connecting Kurdistan to global Islamic scholarship while simultaneously nurturing a distinct Kurdish intellectual tradition.

III. Branches of Islam among the Kurds

While Islam is the predominant religion among Kurds, its practice is characterized by significant internal diversity, encompassing various schools of thought within Sunni Islam, distinct Shia communities, and the unique tradition of Alevism.

A. Sunni Islam: The Shafi'i Predominance and Hanafi Presence

The overwhelming majority of Kurds, estimated to constitute around 75% of the total Kurdish population, adhere to Sunni Islam.[1] A defining characteristic of Kurdish Sunni identity is the predominance of the Shafi'i school of law (madhhab).[1] This adherence distinguishes them from many of their Sunni neighbors, particularly Turks and Arabs, among whom the Hanafi school is generally dominant.[15] This difference in legal interpretation can influence various aspects of religious practice, social customs, and legal rulings within Kurdish Sunni

communities, serving as a subtle but significant marker of distinctiveness.
While the Shafi'i school holds sway, there is also a significant minority of Sunni Kurds who follow the Hanafi school.[1] Additionally, in Southern Kurdistan, specifically within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG), the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence is also reported to be widespread.[5] Historically, there was also a minor presence of Zaydi Shia adherents among Kurds, though this branch later declined.[4] The prevalence of the Shafi'i madhhab remains the most salient feature of Sunni Islam among the Kurds, shaping their religious landscape and differentiating them from surrounding Hanafi-majority populations.

B. Shia Islam: Feyli Kurds and Other Communities

A notable minority of Kurds, estimated to represent between 10% and 15% of the population, follow Shia Islam.[1] The most prominent group among Shia Kurds are the Feylis.[5] They are primarily concentrated in the southeastern border regions where Iraqi Kurdistan meets Iran. Specifically, they inhabit areas like Khanaqin, Mandali, Badra, and Jassan in Iraq, and the adjacent provinces of Kermanshah (Kirmashan), Ilam, and Kordestan in Iran, where Shia Kurds form the majority in some areas.[5] Traditional Shia Kurdish communities have also historically existed in major Iraqi cities such as Baghdad and Kut.[5] While Twelver Shia Islam is dominant today among Shia Kurds, historical sources indicate a past presence of other Shia branches like Zaydism and potentially Isma'ilism in the broader region, including among some Kurdish groups, before their decline.[4]
The geographical location of the Feyli Kurds, straddling the sensitive Iran-Iraq border, imbues their identity with significant geopolitical complexity. Their Shia faith connects them religiously to Iran, the region's major Shia power, while their Kurdish ethnicity links them to Kurdish populations and political movements in both Iraq and Iran. This intersection places them at the nexus of ethno-nationalist struggles, state policies, and broader regional Sunni-Shia tensions. Reports suggest that state policies, particularly from Iran and Iraq, have sometimes aimed at the "Shiazation" of other related minority groups like the Alevi and Yarsani Shabaks, potentially using shared figures like Ali to encourage conversion and extend influence.[5] Furthermore, the presence and activities of Iran-backed Shia militias in Iraq have significantly impacted the political dynamics in Kurdish regions, adding another layer of complexity to the security and political landscape for all Kurds, including Shias.[29] The situation of Shia Kurds thus highlights how religious identity can intersect with ethnicity and geopolitics, shaping the experiences and vulnerabilities of specific communities within the broader Kurdish nation.

C. Alevism: Beliefs and Presence, particularly in Turkey

Alevism represents another significant dimension of religious diversity among Kurds, particularly in Turkey. It is a syncretic faith, incorporating elements from Shia Islam (especially reverence for Ali and the Twelve Imams), Sufism, and possibly older Anatolian and Central Asian shamanistic or pre-Islamic traditions.[6] While sometimes categorized as a heterodox branch of Shia Islam, many Alevis assert a distinct religious identity.[5] Key figures revered include Haji Bektash Veli, and central religious practices involve the Cem ceremony, a communal gathering incorporating music (especially the saz), dance (semah), and spiritual discourse, often conducted in Turkish, Kurdish, or Zazaki.[6]

Estimating the Alevi population in Turkey is challenging due to lack of official recognition and varying definitions, with figures ranging widely from 4% to 25% of the total population, though estimates often cluster around 10-15%, translating to roughly 5 to 15 million people.[1] A substantial portion of this Alevi population is ethnically Kurdish or speaks Zazaki (a distinct language within the Zaza–Gorani group, often associated with Kurds). Estimates of the Kurdish/Zaza proportion among Alevis vary, cited as around 20% [31], about a third [6], or even potentially a majority if related groups like Yarsanis are included under a broader definition.[6] A significant number of Kurds in Turkey identify as Alevi.[27]

Geographically, Alevi Kurds are primarily concentrated in Turkey, particularly in the Dersim region (modern Tunceli province) and surrounding areas like Elazig and Mus.[5] Dersim is often considered the heartland of Kurdish (particularly Zaza-speaking) Alevism.[13] Significant Alevi diaspora communities, including many Kurds, also exist in Western Europe, especially Germany and France.[6]

As both an ethnic and religious minority in Turkey, Kurdish Alevis face a unique form of "double discrimination".[13] They are subject to the pressures of Turkish nationalism aimed at assimilating Kurdish identity, and simultaneously face discrimination due to the Turkish state's historical non-recognition of Alevism as a legitimate faith distinct from Sunni Islam.[13] Their beliefs and practices are often perceived as being further removed from mainstream Islamic orthodoxy compared to Turkish Alevi communities.[17] This distinct positionality, marked by cultural difference and political marginalization, significantly influences their identity and political orientations. Kurdish Alevis have often been associated with secularist viewpoints and left-leaning political movements in Turkey, partly as a response to the perceived Sunni bias of the state and the rise of political Islam.[13] Their presence adds a crucial layer to the religious and political complexity of the Kurdish question in Turkey.

Table 1: Estimated Religious Demographics of Kurds

Religious Group	Estimated Percentage / Number	Primary Regions of Concentration	Key Sources
Sunni Islam (Shafi'i/Hanafi)	Majority (est. 75%)	Turkey, Iraq (KRG), Iran, Syria (Across all regions of Kurdistan)	[1]
Shafi'i School	Predominant Sunni school	Widespread across Kurdistan	[1]
Hanafi School	Significant minority	Present across Kurdistan	[1]
Hanbali School	Present	Southern Kurdistan (KRG)	[5]
Shia Islam (Twelver)	Minority (est. 10-15%)	Iran (Kermanshah, Ilam, Kordestan), Iraq (SE KRG border areas - Feylis, Baghdad, Kut)	[1]

Feyli Kurds	Significant Shia group	Iran-Iraq border regions (Kermanshah, Ilam, Khanaqin, Mandali etc.)	[5]
Alevism (Raa Haq)	Minority (est. 15% of Kurds in Turkey; 20-33% of Turkey's Alevis are Kurdish/Zaza)	Turkey (Dersim/Tunceli, Elazig, Mus), European Diaspora	[5]
Yezidism	Minority (700,000 - 1 million worldwide)	Iraq (Sinjar, Sheikhan), Syria, Turkey, Diaspora (Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Europe)	[1]
Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq/Kaka'i)	Minority (est. 0.5 - 3 million)	Iran (Kermanshah region, Lorestan, Ilam), Iraq (Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Erbil, Mosul areas), Diaspora	[1]
Christianity	Small minority (tens of thousands, primarily converts)	Turkey (historically Hakkari, Tur Abdin), Iraq (KRG - converts, evangelical churches), Diaspora	[1]
Secular/Agnostic/Atheist	Growing number (percentage unclear)	Across Kurdistan, particularly urban areas and diaspora; notable among Alevis	[5]
Other (Zoroastrian, Jewish)	Very small minorities (Zoroastrian revival noted in KRG)	KRG (Zoroastrians); Historically present (Jews largely migrated)	[1]

Note: Population estimates for minority groups and Alevis vary significantly between sources and are often contested. Percentages are approximate and reflect broad estimations found in the source material.

IV. The Significance of Sufism

Sufism, often described as the mystical dimension of Islam [15], has played a profoundly significant role in Kurdish religious, social, and political life for centuries. Its influence extends beyond personal spirituality, shaping community structures, cultural expression, and historical patterns of resistance.

A. Major Orders (Naqshbandi, Qadiri) and their Influence

Among the various Sufi orders (tariqas) present in the Islamic world, two have historically held particular prominence among the Kurds, especially within the majority Sunni Shafi'i

population: the Naqshbandiyya and the Qadiriyya.[1] The Naqshbandi order, known for its emphasis on adherence to Sharia and silent dhikr (remembrance of God), experienced significant expansion in Kurdistan largely due to the efforts of Maulana Khalid Baghdadi (al-Shahrazuri), a Kurd from the Sulaymaniyah region who lived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (d. 1827).[38] His branch, known as the Khalidiyya, spread rapidly throughout the Ottoman Empire and beyond, becoming deeply entrenched in Kurdish society. The Qadiriyya, tracing its lineage to Abd al-Qadir Gilani (d. 1166) – whom many Kurds claim as originating from Gilan in southern Kurdistan rather than northern Iran [17] – is another major order with a strong following, often characterized by more ecstatic rituals.

The leaders of these Sufi orders, known as Sheikhs (Shaykhs), often wielded immense influence that extended far beyond the purely religious sphere. In many Kurdish regions, particularly in rural and tribal areas, the position of Sheikh became hereditary within certain families.[17] These Sheikhs frequently combined their religious authority with temporal power, acting as tribal leaders, mediators in disputes, and figures of social cohesion.[17] Their followers (murids) often displayed intense loyalty, viewing the Sheikh not only as a spiritual guide but also as a source of blessings (baraka) and worldly protection. This combination of religious legitimacy and social influence made Sufi Sheikhs powerful actors within the Kurdish landscape.

The historical trajectory of Sufism in Kurdistan also reveals complex interactions with other religious currents. The Adawiyya order, founded in the 12th century by Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, an ethnic Arab Sufi of Umayyad descent who settled in the Lalish valley among Kurds, was initially an orthodox Sunni Sufi order.[17] However, over time, through interaction and syncretism with the pre-Islamic beliefs of the local population, the Adawiyya order gradually evolved into what is now known as Yezidism, retaining Sufi structural elements (like the Sheikh and Pir hierarchy) but developing distinct theological doctrines.[17] This evolution underscores the dynamic and sometimes heterodox paths Sufi traditions could take in the diverse religious environment of Kurdistan.

B. Sufism in Kurdish Culture, Society, and Resistance

The organizational structures of Sufism provided vital mechanisms for social integration in the often fragmented, tribally based society of Kurdistan.[17] Networks connecting madrasas, Sufi lodges (tekkes or khanaqas), and followers loyal to specific Sheikhs created bonds of solidarity that could cut across tribal divisions and geographical boundaries.[17] This integrative function gave Sufi orders significant potential for political mobilization.

Historically, this potential was frequently realized in the form of resistance movements and uprisings led by Sufi Sheikhs. From the 19th century onwards, as Ottoman and Qajar empires attempted to impose greater central control and later, as modern nation-states (Turkey, Iraq, Iran) sought to suppress Kurdish autonomy and identity, Sufi leaders were often at the forefront of Kurdish revolts.[17] These Sheikhs could leverage their religious authority, their established networks of loyal followers, and their positions within tribal structures to mobilize large numbers of Kurds against perceived threats to their traditional way of life, their religious values, or their nascent national aspirations.

The Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 in Turkey serves as a paradigmatic example.[38] Sheikh Said,

the hereditary head of a powerful Naqshbandi lineage and also a tribal leader, led a major uprising against the newly established, secularizing Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.[38] The rebellion's motivations were complex, explicitly framed in terms of defending Islam against the perceived irreligious policies of the Ankara government (such as the abolition of the Caliphate and the closure of religious institutions), but also intertwined with Kurdish nationalist sentiments (Azadî organization involvement) and the defense of the traditional authority of religious and tribal leaders threatened by centralization.[38] Although ultimately suppressed, the rebellion demonstrated the potent combination of religious fervor, tribal loyalty, and political grievance that Sufi leaders could harness.

Other instances highlight this political dimension. The Naqshbandi order in Kurdistan was noted for its role in defending the Ottoman state's Sufi identity against the rising influence of Wahhabism in the later Ottoman period.[44] In the late 20th century, Sheikh Muhammad Uthman Siraj al-Din, another prominent Naqshbandi Sheikh (originally from Iraqi Kurdistan but based in Iran, then Iraq), formed the "Salvation Force" militia, which fought against the Islamic Republic of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, receiving arms and support from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime.[45] This group framed its struggle in jihadist terms against what it considered an illegitimate Shi'i government.[45]

While the rise of modern, secular Kurdish nationalism and the processes of modernization have arguably diminished the overt political dominance of Sufi orders compared to the past [37], they remain significant cultural forces. In some contexts, Sufism has shown resilience and adaptability. For instance, following the fall of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq in 2003, Sufi orders like the Kasnazani have experienced a resurgence in public influence, engaging in political activities, mobilizing followers, and building local and international networks.[36] This demonstrates that the connection between Sufi structures, religious authority, and political action, while transformed, persists in contemporary Kurdistan. Sufism's legacy is deeply embedded in Kurdish history, representing a powerful force that has shaped social cohesion, cultural identity, and political resistance over centuries.

V. The Broader Religious Tapestry: Non-Islamic Faiths and Secularism

The religious identity of the Kurds is not solely defined by Islam. Alongside the majority Muslim population, Kurdistan is historically and presently home to significant communities adhering to ancient non-Islamic faiths, a Christian minority, and growing secular trends, all contributing to a uniquely heterogeneous religious environment.

A. Yezidism: History, Beliefs, Persecution, and Identity

Yezidism stands as one of the most distinct and ancient faiths indigenous to the Kurdish regions.[1] It is a monotheistic religion whose origins are complex, likely representing a syncretic blend of ancient western Iranic (pre-Zoroastrian) traditions with elements absorbed from Mesopotamian religions, Judaism, Christianity (Nestorian), and Islam (particularly Sufism).[1] Some scholarship suggests Yezidism evolved from the initially orthodox Sunni Sufi Adawiyya order founded by Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir in the 12th century, which gradually incorporated local beliefs and diverged from Islam.[17]

Core Yezidi beliefs center on one transcendent God (referred to as Xwedê, Êzdan, etc.), who created the world but entrusted its care to seven Holy Beings or Angels (Heft Sirr).[1] The

preeminent among these is Tawûsê Melek, the Peacock Angel, who serves as God's active agent in the world and is the primary focus of Yezidi devotion.[1] A unique belief posits that Yezidis descend from Adam but not Eve, setting them apart from other peoples.[9] This belief underpins a strict social structure characterized by endogamy (marriage only within the community, and often within specific lineages) and a hereditary caste system dividing society into Sheikhs, Pirs (both priestly classes), and Murids (laity).[9] Conversion into or out of the religion is traditionally forbidden, and excommunication is a severe punishment.[9] Religious purity is highly emphasized, involving various taboos related to food, clothing (e.g., avoidance of the color blue), and even pronouncing certain words.[32] The tomb of Sheikh Adi in Lalish, northern Iraq, is the holiest shrine and site of annual pilgrimage.[17]

Throughout their history, Yezidis have faced recurrent and often brutal persecution, frequently stemming from misinterpretations of their faith by neighboring Muslim populations who inaccurately labelled Tawûsê Melek as Satan and Yezidis as "devil worshippers".[9] They suffered devastating assaults by Ottoman troops and Sunni Kurdish tribes in the 19th century.[9] The most recent and horrific wave of persecution occurred in August 2014, when the Islamic State (ISIS) attacked the Yezidi heartland of Sinjar in northern Iraq, perpetrating acts recognized by the UN and others as genocide.[9] Thousands were killed, abducted, enslaved (particularly women and girls subjected to sexual slavery and forced marriage), and displaced, leading to a profound communal trauma and ongoing challenges related to missing persons, recovery, and resettlement.[9]

The relationship between Yezidism and Kurdish identity is complex and contested. Yezidis predominantly speak Kurmanji, the main northern dialect of Kurdish.[9] Ethnically, some Yezidis identify strongly as Kurds, viewing their faith as the original Kurdish religion, while others assert a distinct Yezidi ethno-religious identity separate from Kurds.[9] This ambiguity has been exploited politically, with past Iraqi regimes attempting to Arabize Yezidis [9], and ongoing tensions reported with Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities, including accusations of assimilationist pressures and distrust stemming from the perceived failure of Kurdish Peshmerga forces to protect Sinjar from ISIS.[9] Numbering between 700,000 and 1 million worldwide before the ISIS genocide, the Yezidi community represents a vital, yet profoundly vulnerable, component of Kurdistan's religious mosaic.[1] Their survival against centuries of persecution speaks to their resilience, while their unique beliefs and contested identity highlight the intricate interplay of religion, ethnicity, and politics in the region.

B. Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq / Kaka'i): Syncretic Beliefs and Kurdish Connection

Yarsanism, also known by its adherents as Ahl-e Haqq ("People of Truth") and referred to by some in Iraq as Kaka'i, constitutes another significant indigenous, syncretic faith deeply rooted in Kurdish culture and history.[1] Founded by the revered figure Sultan Sahak in the late 14th century in the borderlands between present-day Iran and Iraq, Yarsanism draws followers primarily from specific Kurdish tribes, including the Guran, Sanjabi, Kalhor, Zangana, and Jalalvand, although there are also Turkic-speaking adherents and connections to the Shabak community.[10] Population estimates vary widely, ranging from over half a million to potentially two or three million, concentrated mainly in the Kermanshah province and adjacent areas of

western Iran, and in parts of northern and eastern Iraq, particularly around Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Halabja, and Mosul.[10]

The core tenets of Yarsanism involve a belief in the successive manifestations (mazhariyyat) of the Divine Essence in human form throughout different epochs of history, similar to the concept of avatars.[10] They believe God manifests through a primary figure and seven secondary figures (the Haft Tan or "Seven Persons") in each major era.[10] Sultan Sahak is considered the primary divine manifestation of the current (fourth) epoch.[10] Another central doctrine is the belief in the transmigration of the soul (dunaduni in Kurdish), allowing for spiritual purification across lifetimes.[10] Yarsani cosmology distinguishes between an inner, esoteric world (bātinī) that governs reality and an outer, exoteric world (zāhirī) perceived by humans.[10] Their religious worldview incorporates millenarism, angelology, and elements of dualism, sharing some features with Yezidism and Alevism.[10] Influences from Shia Islam are evident, particularly in the reverence shown to Ali ibn Abi Talib, considered the primary manifestation of the second epoch, which has led to the sometimes disparaging label "Ali Allahi" (worshippers of Ali), a term rejected by Yarsanis.[10] Sufi influences are also present, notably in practices like dhikr during communal gatherings.[33]

Yarsani religious life revolves around sacred texts and rituals. The central scripture is the Kalâm-e Saranjâm ("Discourse of Conclusion"), attributed to the teachings of Sultan Sahak and written down in the 15th century, primarily in the Gorani dialect of Kurdish.[10] Few modern adherents can read Gorani, with Southern Kurdish or Sorani being their vernacular.[10] Key rituals include the jam ceremony, a communal gathering requiring at least seven male participants seated in a circle, supervised by a Sayyed (member of a hereditary priestly lineage), featuring the ritual sharing of food and water, and the singing of sacred poems (kalām) accompanied by the tanbur, a long-necked lute considered sacred.[33] Like Yezidis, Yarsanis traditionally have hereditary religious lineages (Sayyeds) responsible for guiding the laity (Morids).[34]

Yarsanism embodies the complex religious syncretism characteristic of the Kurdish borderlands, weaving together elements from Islam (Shia, Sufi) with potentially older Iranic traditions and unique doctrines. Its strong association with specific Kurdish tribes and the Gorani language reinforces the deep connection between this distinct faith and Kurdish cultural identity, particularly in the Zagros mountain regions straddling Iran and Iraq. They face pressures in Iran due to their non-Shia identity and have suffered displacement and hardship in Iraq.[33]

C. Christianity: Historical Presence, Assimilation, and Modern Conversions

Christianity's presence among the Kurdish people stretches back to antiquity, predating the arrival of Islam.[11] The early history mirrors that of neighboring regions in Anatolia and Mesopotamia. A significant milestone was the conversion of the royal house of the Kurdish kingdom of Adiabene, centered in Arbil (modern Erbil), from Judaism to Christianity by the 5th century AD.[11] These early Kurdish Christians, like their Jewish predecessors in the region, primarily used Aramaic as their ecclesiastical and administrative language.[11] Central Kurdistan was noted as being predominantly Christian at the time of the Islamic conquests in the 7th

century.[11] The adoption of Nestorian Christianity became widespread, particularly after the Church of the East broke with Rome and Constantinople, which afforded Christians a degree of protection within the later Sasanian Empire.[11]

The response of Anatolian Kurds to Christianity was varied. Those in the westernmost regions (Pontus, western Cappadocia, Cilicia) largely converted before the 7th century, but this often led to their gradual Hellenization and eventual loss of distinct Kurdish identity before the arrival of the Turks.[11] Conversely, Kurds in eastern Anatolia and regions east of the Euphrates who resisted Christian conversion faced persecution and deportation by the Byzantine Empire, particularly in the 8th and 9th centuries.[11]

Despite the widespread conversion of Kurds to Islam over subsequent centuries, pockets of Christian Kurds persisted. Medieval historians like Mas'udi (10th century) and travelers like Marco Polo (13th century) documented the existence of Christian Kurds, distinguishing them from other Christian populations like Armenians or Assyrians/Syriacs.[11] Notable figures of Kurdish origin who embraced Christianity include Nasr the Kurd (Theophobos), a 9th-century Byzantine commander [25], and Ibn ad-Dahhak, a 10th-century Kurdish prince who converted from Islam to Orthodox Christianity.[12] The Zakarids (Mkhargrdzeli), a prominent Armenian-Georgian noble family that ruled parts of Armenia in the 13th century, were also of Kurdish origin.[11]

However, a major historical trend was the assimilation of Kurdish converts into larger Christian ethno-religious communities. Over time, many Christian Kurds adopted the Aramaic (Syriac) or Armenian languages, which were the dominant liturgical and communal languages of Christians in the region. Consequently, they were often absorbed into and counted among the Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac or Armenian populations.[11] The Neo-Aramaic speaking Christian communities (often self-identifying as Assyrians or Chaldeans today) found in Kurdistan are considered an amalgam of Kurdish and Semitic peoples who retained the Christian faith and Aramaic language.[11] This assimilation process significantly reduced the number of people identifying as both Kurdish and Christian.

From the 15th century onwards, and intensifying in the 19th and early 20th centuries, European and American Christian missionaries became active in Kurdistan, establishing centers in towns like Bitlis, Urfa, Mosul, Urmia, and Salmas.[11] These missions led to further conversions, sometimes among Muslims but also significantly among Yezidis, who, not being Muslim, were not subject to Ottoman laws prohibiting apostasy from Islam.[12] The current Kurdish Christian population, estimated in the tens of thousands (primarily in Turkey and the diaspora), is likely a mix of descendants from ancient communities and more recent converts.[11]

In recent decades, there has been a noticeable, albeit small-scale, resurgence of Christianity among Kurds. This includes conversions from Muslim backgrounds, sometimes linked to disillusionment with political Islam following events like the rise of ISIS, or a desire to connect with perceived pre-Islamic or non-Islamic aspects of Kurdish heritage.[5] Evangelical Kurdish-speaking churches, such as the Kurdzman Church of Christ founded in Erbil in 2000, have emerged in the KRG and diaspora.[12] While numerically small, this modern phenomenon

adds another layer to the complex and evolving religious identity of the Kurds, indicating a fluidity that continues to shape the community.

D. Secularism and Non-Religious Trends in Kurdish Society

Alongside the diverse religious affiliations, secularism and non-religious viewpoints represent a significant and arguably growing trend within Kurdish society.[5] Observers have frequently noted that many Kurds appear "principally secular" or seem to practice their Islam less strictly than some neighboring populations.[5] Potential explanations for this include the historical experience of oppression at the hands of states or groups acting in the name of Islam, the enduring influence of pre-Islamic cultural norms, or the impact of modern secular ideologies.[15] Social indicators sometimes cited in this context include the relatively greater degree of freedom and public visibility enjoyed by women in many Kurdish communities compared to more conservative societies in the Middle East.[5]

There is evidence suggesting an increasing number of individuals identifying as atheist, agnostic, or simply non-affiliated with any organized religion within Kurdistan and its diaspora.[5] This trend appears to have intensified in recent years, partly as a reaction against the violence and extremism perpetrated by Islamist groups like ISIS, which targeted Kurds (especially minorities like Yezidis) and generated widespread disillusionment.[5]

Historically, state policies have also played a crucial role. The imposition of radical secularism in Turkey following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire had a profound impact on Kurdish society.[14] While the state's Turkish nationalist agenda aimed at assimilation, its secularizing reforms (abolishing the Caliphate, closing madrasas and Sufi orders) alienated many religious Kurds, pushing some towards religiously framed resistance (like the Sheikh Said rebellion).[38] Simultaneously, these secularizing currents, along with the influence of international movements, contributed to the adoption of secular ideologies – including various forms of nationalism detached from religion, as well as Marxism and Leninism – by significant segments of the Kurdish political movement.[14] Some of these secular movements adopted explicitly anti-clerical or even anti-Islam stances.[14]

The Kurdish Alevi community in Turkey provides a specific example of secularism being actively embraced as part of identity politics. Facing pressure from an increasingly Islamist-leaning Turkish state, many Kurdish Alevis have emphasized secular values – alongside gender equality, environmentalism, and modern lifestyles – as defining characteristics of their distinct Alevi identity and political opposition.[13]

This rise of secularism exists in a dynamic tension with the deep historical roots and continued influence of Islam and Sufism in Kurdish culture, as well as the presence of active Kurdish Islamist political parties and movements.[14] The Kurdish ideological landscape is therefore complex and contested, marked by ongoing debates and competition between secular and religious worldviews. Secularism is not merely an absence of religion but an active political and social force shaped by historical experiences, state actions, global trends, and reactions to religious extremism, contributing significantly to the internal diversity of Kurdish thought and politics.

VI. Islam's Imprint on Kurdish Culture and Identity

For over a millennium, Islam, in its various forms, has been interwoven with the fabric of

Kurdish society, leaving an indelible mark on traditions, social structures, cultural expressions, and collective identity. While Kurdish culture retains distinct elements rooted in its pre-Islamic past and unique historical trajectory, the influence of Islamic beliefs, laws, and institutions has been pervasive.

A. Influence on Traditions, Social Structures, and Daily Life

The adoption of Islam, predominantly Sunni Islam of the Shafi'i school, profoundly shaped Kurdish social norms and structures over the centuries.[16] Traditional Kurdish social organization, often characterized by strong patrilineal kinship systems involving lineages, clans, and tribes, interacted with Islamic principles.[50] While tribalism predates Islam, Islamic tenets likely reinforced patrilineal descent and provided a shared framework of identity and law that overlaid tribal affiliations.

Islamic influence is particularly evident in family life and personal status matters. Marriage practices, while retaining local customs, often reflect Islamic norms.[50] Arranged marriages are common, and the traditional preference for marrying a cousin, specifically the father's brother's daughter (a practice found in many Middle Eastern societies, not exclusively Islamic), was prevalent.[50] Marriage negotiations involve families and formalize agreements regarding bride-wealth (mahr), an Islamic requirement, though its specific use and amount are subject to local custom.[50] Islamic law permits polygyny (up to four wives), and while practiced among Kurds, it has historically been limited by economic constraints rather than religious prohibition.[50] Divorce procedures also reflect Islamic law, granting men the right to divorce through repudiation, while women's rights to initiate divorce are more restricted, often linked to stipulations in the marriage contract or repayment of the bride-wealth.[50]

The division of labor in traditional Kurdish society appears primarily based on gender roles typical of pastoral and agricultural economies, with women responsible for domestic tasks, dairy processing, weaving, and certain agricultural activities, while men handled plowing, sowing, harvesting, and market interactions.[50] While Islam prescribes general roles for men and women, the specific tasks were likely more heavily influenced by the socio-economic realities of Kurdish life.

Historically, authority structures in Kurdish society often blended tribal leadership with religious legitimacy. Figures like Aghas (tribal or lineage chiefs) and Sheikhs (Sufi leaders) held significant social and political power.[32] Sheikhs, in particular, derived authority from their perceived spiritual connection and leadership within Sufi orders, often commanding deep loyalty that transcended tribal lines.[17] This intertwining of religious and tribal authority was a key feature of Kurdish social organization until the impacts of modernization, land reforms, urbanization, and the rise of centralized states began to erode these traditional structures.[48] Despite these changes, the legacy of Islam remains deeply embedded in Kurdish social customs and family relations.

B. Interaction between Islamic Law (Sharia) and Kurdish Customary Law ('Urf)

The integration of Islam into Kurdish society involved a complex interaction between the formal precepts of Islamic law (Sharia) and pre-existing Kurdish customary laws and traditions ('urf). Islamic jurisprudence, across various schools of thought, acknowledges the concept of 'urf, which refers to the customs, usages, and norms prevalent in a particular society.[51]

Crucially, Islamic legal theory distinguishes between 'urf sahih (valid custom) and 'urf fasid (corrupt custom).[51] Valid custom, defined as practices that are widespread, long-established, reasonable, and do not directly contradict explicit texts of the Quran or Sunnah, can be recognized as a supplementary source of law or a factor in interpreting and applying Sharia.[51] Corrupt custom, which violates fundamental Islamic principles, is rejected.[51]

This principle of 'urf likely provided a crucial mechanism for navigating the relationship between Islam and the deeply ingrained tribal customs of the Kurds. It offered a framework that allowed for a degree of legal pluralism, enabling the continuation of local traditions alongside the implementation of Sharia, particularly in areas not explicitly legislated by the primary Islamic sources. The predominance of the Shafi'i school among Kurds may also be relevant, as the Shafi'i madhhab, while emphasizing textual sources, is generally considered to allow for consideration of local context and custom in legal application, potentially facilitating this integration.

While specific examples of how Kurdish 'urf interacted with Sharia in areas like dispute resolution, land tenure, or social obligations are not detailed in the provided materials, the theoretical framework of 'urf suggests a process of mutual accommodation rather than outright replacement. Kurdish customary practices related to tribal governance, honor codes, hospitality, and conflict mediation likely continued to operate, being integrated or tacitly accepted within the broader Islamic legal and social order as long as they were not deemed 'urf fasid. This flexibility would have been essential for the successful embedding of Islam within the distinct social and cultural environment of Kurdistan, allowing the faith to become deeply rooted without necessarily erasing all aspects of pre-existing Kurdish identity and practice. The consideration of custom alongside Sharia principles highlights the strong links between religious institutions, legal systems, and the social context.[52]

C. Language, Literature, and Islamic Scholarship

Islam's arrival and consolidation in Kurdistan significantly impacted Kurdish intellectual and literary life, serving as both a conduit to the broader Islamic civilization and a stimulus for vernacular expression. As previously noted, madrasas became vital centers not only for religious learning but also for wider scholarship, and importantly, they facilitated the use of the Kurdish language alongside Arabic, the lingua franca of Islamic scholarship.[22] The translation of Arabic texts into Kurdish for educational purposes indicates a conscious effort to integrate Islamic knowledge into the local linguistic context.[22]

This environment nurtured the emergence of notable Kurdish scholars, poets, and writers who contributed to Islamic civilization while often writing in or about their Kurdish context. Figures like the 9th-century poet Bassami Kurdi, the 11th-century poet Ali Hariri, the 12th-century female scholar Fakhr-un-Nisa, and the 13th-14th century geographer and historian Abulfeda exemplify early Kurdish contributions within the Islamic sphere.[22] The development of vernacular religious learning in Kurdish, particularly in early modern times, represents a significant strand of this tradition, demonstrating that religious scholarship was not solely confined to Arabic, Persian, or Turkish.[16]

Even within heterodox or syncretic communities, language played a key role in religious expression. The sacred texts of Yarsanism, the Kalâm-e Saranjâm, were primarily composed in

the Gorani dialect of Kurdish, preserving religious teachings in a vernacular form.[10] Similarly, Kurdish Alevi communities maintained oral traditions of prayers and poems in Kurmanji and Zazaki, which have seen recent efforts towards recovery and publication.[20]

Beyond vernacular expression, Kurdish scholars ('ulama) also made significant contributions to mainstream Islamic scholarship in the major languages of the region – Arabic, Persian, and Turkish – acting as intellectual bridges between different cultural and political zones of the Muslim world.[17] Conversely, religious texts from other traditions were also translated into Kurdish, such as the early translations of the Christian Gospel undertaken by European missionaries, indicating Kurdish was recognized early on as a distinct language field.[11]

In summary, Islam acted as a powerful catalyst for intellectual and literary activity among Kurds. It connected them to wider civilizational currents while also providing a framework and impetus for developing religious and scholarly traditions in their own language, thereby intertwining Islamic practice with the affirmation and evolution of Kurdish linguistic and cultural identity.

VII. Religion, Politics, and Nationalism

The relationship between religion, particularly Islam, and Kurdish political movements has been consistently significant, complex, and often contentious throughout modern history. Religious identities, institutions, and leaders have frequently served as potent forces for mobilization, resistance, and ideological framing within the Kurdish struggle for rights and self-determination, existing in a dynamic interplay with secular nationalist currents and the policies of regional states.

A. The Role of Islam in Kurdish Political Movements

Historically, Islamic identity and the authority of religious figures, such as Mullahs and Sufi Sheikhs, have been central to Kurdish political mobilization, especially in resisting external control.[2] In traditional Kurdish society, Sufi Sheikhs, combining religious charisma with tribal leadership, often commanded widespread loyalty and possessed the networks necessary to organize resistance.[17] Many early Kurdish uprisings against Ottoman and Qajar centralization, and later against the nation-states that divided Kurdistan, were led by such figures.[17]

The Sheikh Said rebellion in Turkey in 1925 stands as a prominent example of this dynamic.[16] Led by a Naqshbandi Sufi Sheikh, the revolt explicitly invoked the defense of Islam against the secularizing reforms of the Kemalist republic.[42] It mobilized followers based on a combination of religious conservatism, loyalty to traditional leaders whose authority was threatened, tribal interests, and nascent Kurdish nationalist aspirations fostered by groups like Azadî.[38] While ultimately suppressed, the rebellion underscored the power of religious framing in galvanizing Kurdish resistance.

Another key figure in 20th-century Kurdish nationalism was Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the long-time leader of the Kurdish movement in Iraq.[2] Although bearing the religious title "Mullah" and emerging from a traditional, religiously embedded society (his family associated with a Naqshbandi lineage that had shown heterodox tendencies [17]), the movement he led, primarily through the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), evolved into a largely secular nationalist struggle focused on autonomy and Kurdish rights within Iraq.[2] Barzani's trajectory

illustrates the complex evolution where figures with traditional religious backgrounds could become leaders of modern nationalist movements, adapting their strategies and ideologies over time.

In more recent decades, specific Kurdish Islamist groups have emerged, distinct from secular nationalist movements. Examples include the Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey (formed in the 1980s, unrelated to the Lebanese group), which initially aimed to liberate Islamic society in Turkey as a whole but later shifted towards a more Kurdish focus, partly due to state repression and a breakdown in solidarity with Turkish Islamists.[19] Another example is the Naqshbandi-led Salvation Force in Iran, which fought the Islamic Republic with Iraqi support during the 1980s.[45] The rise of Kurdish Islamism can be partly understood as a defensive reaction to the oppression experienced by Kurds under often secular, nationalist regimes in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, utilizing both Kurdish identity and Islamic principles as sources of mobilization and legitimacy.[4] Religion, therefore, has served not only as a source of traditional authority for resistance but also as the basis for modern Islamist political projects within the Kurdish context.

B. Secular vs. Islamist Currents in Kurdish Nationalism

Kurdish nationalism is far from a monolithic entity; rather, it encompasses a broad spectrum of political ideologies, reflecting internal debates and divergent responses to historical circumstances. This spectrum ranges from staunchly secular movements, often influenced by Marxist-Leninist thought or other leftist ideologies, to explicitly Islamist parties, with various forms of conservative or liberal nationalism occupying the middle ground.

Secular nationalism gained significant traction among Kurds, particularly from the mid-20th century onwards, emerging as a reaction to the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of exclusionary Turkish, Arab, and Persian nationalisms in the new nation-states that divided Kurdistan.[40] Influenced by global trends and often supported by external powers (like the Soviet Union during the Cold War), secular ideologies offered frameworks for national liberation and social transformation that sometimes positioned themselves in opposition to traditional religious structures and beliefs.[14] Parties like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and its affiliates, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, draw heavily from the secular, leftist, and increasingly democratic confederalist ideology developed by Abdullah Öcalan.[54] While originating in a Marxist-Leninist framework, this ideology now emphasizes grassroots democracy, gender equality, and ecological principles, largely operating outside a religious framework.[55]

Conversely, Islamist currents have also been a persistent feature of Kurdish politics. Parties like the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG, formerly Komal) in Iraqi Kurdistan explicitly seek to blend Islamic principles with Kurdish national aspirations.[57] The KIG, for instance, evolved from a militant background to advocating for "Islamic Democracy" while strongly opposing the perceived corruption and authoritarianism of the main secular nationalist parties.[57] These groups appeal to religiously conservative segments of the Kurdish population and represent a distinct ideological alternative to secular nationalism.

The major traditional nationalist parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq,

founded by Mullah Mustafa Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which split from the KDP with a more leftist orientation, occupy a space that is often described as conservative or social-democratic nationalism, respectively.[54] While operating within a largely secular political framework and maintaining ties with Western powers, their leadership often emerges from traditional backgrounds, and they must navigate the religious sentiments of their constituents.[2] Other groups, like the Gorran (Change) Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan, represent a liberal, reformist, and anti-corruption trend that split from the PUK.[57]
This ideological diversity creates a complex internal dynamic within the broader Kurdish movement. Tensions and sometimes open conflict have occurred between secular leftist groups and Islamist factions (e.g., clashes involving the Salvation Force in Iran [45]). The relationship between secularism and Islamism remains a key fault line, mirroring broader Middle Eastern debates but shaped by the specific Kurdish experience of statelessness, multi-state division, and varying encounters with state power.[14] The choice between prioritizing national identity, religious identity, or a synthesis of the two continues to inform political strategies and divisions among Kurds.

C. State Policies towards Islam and Kurds

The policies of the four states with significant Kurdish populations (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria) towards both Islam and Kurdish identity have profoundly shaped the Kurdish experience and the nature of Kurdish political movements. These policies vary significantly, reflecting each state's dominant national ideology and its specific relationship with religion.

- **Turkey:** The Turkish Republic was founded on principles of secularism and an assertive Turkish nationalism that denied distinct Kurdish identity, labelling Kurds as "Mountain Turks".[44] This involved suppressing Kurdish language and culture, as well as dismantling traditional religious institutions like madrasas and Sufi orders after 1925, which were seen as potential centers of Kurdish resistance.[4] This aggressive secularism and assimilationism fueled decades of Kurdish opposition, both secular and religious.[38] The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since 2002, with its Islamist roots, introduced a period of complex change. Initially, the AKP government engaged in a peace process (2013-2015) and sometimes invoked shared Islamic identity ("Islamic brotherhood") to appeal to religious Kurds and counter the secular PKK.[19] However, this approach proved fragile. The peace process collapsed, and the state reverted to a heavily security-focused policy towards the PKK, often intertwined with Turkish nationalist rhetoric, while still attempting to maintain support among conservative Kurds.[3] Turkey's policy remains a complex mix of security concerns, nationalist ideology, and pragmatic engagement with different Kurdish factions.
- **Iraq:** Iraq's history under the monarchy and particularly the Ba'ath Party was marked by severe repression of Kurds, including denial of rights, forced Arabization policies, and culminating in the genocidal Anfal campaign in the late 1980s.[9] Following the US-led invasion in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG) achieved constitutional recognition and substantial autonomy.[21] The KRG constitution establishes Islam as a source of legislation but also guarantees freedom of belief and

practice for recognized minorities like Christians, Yezidis, and Sabean-Mandeans.[21] The KRG is often cited as a relative haven for religious minorities fleeing violence elsewhere in Iraq and the region.[18] However, challenges persist. Minorities report systemic discrimination, difficulties in accessing rights, arbitrary application of law enforcement, and concerns about the influence of the dominant Kurdish parties (KDP and PUK) potentially undermining genuine minority representation.[21] The KRG must manage its own internal religious diversity (Sunni majority, Shia Feylis, Yezidis, Christians, Kaka'is, Shabak) while navigating complex political and economic relations with the federal government in Baghdad, often influenced by broader sectarian (Shia-Sunni) dynamics.[5]

- **Iran:** The Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution establishes Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion, mandating that all laws conform to "Islamic criteria".[64] While Shia Kurds might theoretically align with the state's religious identity [40], the large Sunni Kurdish population faces religious discrimination alongside severe ethnic marginalization.[64] Kurdish political aspirations are systematically suppressed, often framed by the state as threats to national security and territorial integrity.[65] Non-Shia religious minorities, including Yarsanis, Baha'is (viewed as apostates), and Christian converts from Islam, face intense persecution, arbitrary arrests, and denial of basic rights.[64] The Kurdish regions of Iran suffer from significant economic underdevelopment, political marginalization, heavy militarization, and disproportionately high rates of political imprisonment and executions.[64] Iran also actively uses its influence, particularly through Shia networks and allied militias, to project power into Kurdish areas of neighboring countries, especially Iraq.[29]
- **Syria:** Under the Ba'athist regime, Syria pursued Arab nationalism and official secularism, leading to the suppression of Kurdish identity, denial of citizenship for many Kurds, and restrictions on language and culture.[66] The Syrian civil war, starting in 2011, dramatically altered the situation. Kurdish forces, led by the PYD and its armed wing the YPG (later forming the core of the Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF), established de facto autonomy in large parts of northern and eastern Syria (Rojava).[54] The political project in Rojava promotes a secular ideology based on democratic confederalism, emphasizing decentralization, ethnic and religious pluralism, environmentalism, and gender equality.[54] This administration seeks to manage relations among the region's diverse population (Kurds, Arabs, Syriac Christians, Yezidis) based on these principles, representing a stark contrast to the policies of neighboring states. However, this entity faces immense challenges, including military pressure from Turkey, ongoing conflict with remnants of ISIS, complex relations with the Assad regime, and internal governance issues.[60]

In conclusion, Kurds across the four states navigate vastly different political and religious landscapes. State policies, driven by competing national ideologies and varying approaches to Islam, create distinct contexts where Kurdish identity and religious practice are expressed, suppressed, or instrumentalized in different ways. The KRG in Iraq and the autonomous administration in Northeast Syria represent significant attempts at Kurdish self-governance

with differing models for managing religious diversity, contrasting sharply with the assimilationist or repressive policies prevalent in Turkey and Iran.

VIII. Regional Variations: A Comparative Perspective

The relationship between Kurdish identity and Islam is not uniform across Kurdistan but varies significantly depending on the political, social, and religious context imposed by the nation-state borders that divide the region. A comparative analysis of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria reveals distinct patterns and challenges.

- **Turkey:** The Kurdish experience in Turkey is dominated by the historical and ongoing tension between a state founded on secular Turkish nationalism and a large Kurdish population that is predominantly Sunni Muslim (Shafi'i) but also includes a very significant Alevi minority.[3] State policies of assimilation and suppression of Kurdish identity, coupled with the forceful imposition of secularism that dismantled traditional religious structures, fueled decades of Kurdish resistance.[38] This resistance manifested in both secular nationalist forms (e.g., PKK) and religiously motivated movements (e.g., Sheikh Said rebellion, Kurdish Hizbullah).[19] The AKP era brought attempts to utilize shared Islamic identity to bridge the divide, but ultimately reverted to security-driven approaches, highlighting the state's instrumental use of both nationalism and religion.[3] The Alevi Kurds face a double burden of ethnic and religious non-recognition, often aligning them with secular opposition forces.[13]
- **Iraq:** In Iraq, the post-2003 establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) created a unique context where Kurds hold political power within an autonomous region.[21] Here, the Sunni Kurdish majority (primarily KDP and PUK supporters) dominates the political landscape.[54] The primary challenge involves managing internal diversity – including Shia Feyli Kurds on the border with Iran, Yezidis concentrated in Sinjar and Sheikhan, various Christian denominations (Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac), Kaka'is, and Shabaks – while navigating complex relations with the central government in Baghdad.[5] The KRG promotes an image of religious tolerance and has provided refuge for persecuted minorities.[18] However, minorities still face challenges related to discrimination, resource allocation, security concerns (especially in disputed territories), and ensuring genuine political representation amidst the dominance of the major Kurdish parties.[21] Sufism also retains a notable cultural prevalence in Iraqi Kurdistan.[5]
- **Iran:** The situation for Kurds in Iran is shaped by the country's status as a Shia Islamic Republic.[64] This creates a division within the Kurdish population itself, between Shia Kurds (like the Feylis and others in southern Kurdish provinces) who share the state religion, and the large number of Sunni Kurds who face religious discrimination in addition to ethnic marginalization.[5] Both groups, however, face suppression of their Kurdish identity and political aspirations by a centralized state that views Kurdish demands through a security lens.[65] Heterodox groups like the Yarsanis (Ahl-e Haqq) also face pressure.[10] The Kurdish regions in Iran are marked by severe economic neglect, heavy militarization, and high levels of political repression, making the expression of both distinct Kurdish identity and non-Shia religious practice highly

challenging.[64]

- **Syria:** Pre-civil war Syria saw Kurds suppressed under a secular Arab nationalist Ba'athist regime.[66] The conflict since 2011 led to the emergence of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES or Rojava), dominated by the Kurdish PYD/SDF.[54] This administration champions a secular, decentralized political model based on democratic confederalism, explicitly promoting ethnic and religious pluralism, co-existence, and gender equality.[54] This represents a radical departure from the surrounding state models. It attempts to manage relations between the majority Sunni Muslim Kurdish population and significant Arab, Christian (Syriac/Assyrian), and Yezidi minorities within its framework. The success and sustainability of this model remain contested amidst ongoing conflict and external pressures, particularly from Turkey.[60]

This comparison underscores how the political and religious identity of Kurds is inextricably linked to the specific nation-state context they inhabit. While cross-border cultural and linguistic ties persist, the political expression of Kurdishness and its relationship with Islam (whether as a majority faith, a source of opposition, or one element within a pluralistic framework) diverges significantly based on state ideology, the degree of autonomy achieved, and the internal religious makeup of the Kurdish population within each state's borders.[3]

Table 2: Comparative State Policies on Religion and Kurdish Identity

Feature	Turkey	Iraq (incl. KRG)	Iran	Syria (incl. AANES/Rojava)
State Ideology	Secular Turkish Nationalism (Historically aggressive; complex under AKP)	Federal Republic; KRG: Autonomous Region within Iraq	Islamic Republic (Twelver Shia Islam)	Arab Republic (Historically Ba'athist/Secular); AANES: Democratic Confederalism (Secular/Pluralist)
Official Stance on Islam	Officially Secular; Sunni Islam (Hanafi) historically privileged; Diyanet controls Sunni institutions	Islam official religion of Iraq; KRG Constitution respects Islam, guarantees freedom for others	Twelver Shia Islam official state religion; basis for law	Officially Secular (Syrian State); AANES: Secular, guarantees religious freedom
Policy Towards Kurdish Identity	Historically denial/assimilation ("Mountain Turks"); language/cultural restrictions; recent limited	Historically repression/Anfal; KRG constitutionally recognized, Kurdish official language in KRG	Ethnic discrimination; suppression of political aspirations; securitization of Kurdish issue	Historically suppression/denial of rights; AANES: Kurdish identity central, promotes multi-ethnicity

	recognition fluctuated with peace process/security concerns			
Policy Towards Religious Minorities (esp. Kurdish-related)	Non-recognition of Alevism; historical pressure on non-Sunnis; relative improvement but challenges remain	KRG provides refuge/legal protections (Yezidis, Christians etc.); challenges in implementation, discrimination, security concerns	Severe persecution of Baha'is, Christian converts, Yarsanis; discrimination against Sunni Kurds	AANES promotes religious pluralism/coexistence; challenges in practice, security concerns
Key Examples / Periods	Kemalist secularization (post-1925); AKP peace process (2013-15) & subsequent conflict; suppression of HDP	Ba'athist Anfal campaign (1980s); KRG establishment (post-2003); ISIS genocide against Yezidis (2014); KRG sheltering minorities	Post-1979 Revolution repression; ongoing economic/political marginalization; high execution rates	Ba'athist assimilation; Rojava revolution (post-2012); Turkish interventions against AANES
Key Sources	[3]	[21]	[30]	[54]

IX. Synthesis and Conclusion

The relationship between the Kurdish people and Islam is profoundly deep yet extraordinarily complex, defying simplistic categorization. While the majority of Kurds identify as Sunni Muslims, primarily adhering to the Shafi'i school of law, this demographic reality coexists with a remarkable degree of religious heterogeneity that is central to the Kurdish experience.[1] Significant communities of Shia Muslims (notably the Feylis), Alevis (particularly in Turkey), adherents of ancient indigenous faiths like Yezidism and Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq/Kaka'i) that retain pre-Islamic elements, a historical Christian presence experiencing modern conversions, and growing secular and non-religious segments all contribute to this diverse tapestry.[1]

The historical process of Islamization among Kurds, beginning in the 7th century, was not a uniform or instantaneous event but a protracted and contested development spanning centuries.[22] Narratives of early mass conversion coexist with evidence of prolonged resistance, coercion, and the persistence of non-Muslim communities in isolated regions, suggesting a complex interplay of political expediency, military pressure, and genuine religious adoption.[4] The establishment of madrasas played a crucial role in integrating Kurdistan into the broader Islamic world while also fostering distinct Kurdish intellectual and linguistic traditions.[17]

Sufism, particularly through the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders, has been deeply influential, providing social cohesion that transcended tribal divisions and vesting significant authority in

hereditary Sheikhs.[1] These Sufi networks and leaders were pivotal in organizing Kurdish resistance against state centralization and perceived threats to religious values, most notably in the Sheikh Said rebellion.[17] While its direct political power has fluctuated with modernization, Sufism remains a significant cultural and sometimes political force.[36] Furthermore, the interaction between formal Islamic law (Sharia) and Kurdish customary law ('urf) likely allowed for a degree of legal pluralism, facilitating Islam's integration while preserving aspects of local tradition.[51]

The modern era is characterized by a dynamic tension between religious and secular forces within Kurdish society and political movements.[14] Secular nationalism, often influenced by leftist ideologies, emerged as a powerful force, particularly in reaction to oppressive state policies.[48] Concurrently, Kurdish Islamist movements arose, framing their struggle in religious terms, sometimes as a defensive response to secular state repression.[4] This ideological diversity is reflected in the range of contemporary Kurdish political parties, from the secular-leftist HDP and PYD to the conservative nationalist KDP and PUK, and the Islamist KIU and KIG.[54]

Crucially, the relationship between Kurdish identity and Islam is profoundly mediated by the policies and ideologies of the nation-states that divide Kurdistan.[3] Turkey's aggressive secular nationalism, Iran's Shia Islamic Republic framework, Iraq's complex federalism with KRG autonomy, and Syria's shift towards a secular confederal model in Rojava create vastly different contexts. Kurds often face dual pressures based on their ethnicity and, for those not adhering to the state-favored religious norm (Sunnis in Iran, Alevis in Turkey, all minorities), their faith.[13]

In conclusion, understanding the Kurdish relationship with Islam requires appreciating its historical depth, its profound internal diversity, the enduring influence of Sufism, the complex interplay with custom and culture, and the powerful impact of modern political ideologies and state fragmentation. Moving beyond monolithic characterizations reveals a dynamic picture where Islam serves as a source of personal faith, cultural identity, social structure, political mobilization, and ideological contestation. The very religious heterogeneity that marks the Kurdish people, encompassing diverse Islamic interpretations alongside ancient faiths and modern secularism, may itself be a defining element of their collective identity and a potential, albeit challenged, foundation for a distinct culture of tolerance in a turbulent region.[19]

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