

Three Generations of Jihadism in Iraqi Kurdistan



Adel BAKAWAN

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Abstract

The aim of this report is to describe and explain how structural changes have affected three generations of jihadists in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Jihadi generation of the 1980s, that of Ansar al-Islam in the 2000s and that of the Kurds of Islamic State (ISIS) or Daesh in the 2010s. How are ideological transformations cultivated among Kurdish Islamist individuals? How have they come to abandon the initial programme of Islamism in order to join Jihadism, shifting from one paradigm of the re-Islamisation of society from below, to another paradigm of state control through jihad? The threat of the third jihadist generation perceived by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and their response strategy will also be examined, highlighting the fragilities of Iraqi Kurdish government, and its overdependence on the alliance with Washington.

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Introduction

Iraqi Kurdistan, previously known as a secure and stable¹ region amidst the chaotic and shaken Middle East,² was struck by a wave of attacks in 2016. Between September and December of that year, there were five recorded terrorist operations led by 249 Kurdish jihadists rallied by the Islamic State (ISIS) or Daesh, of which 47 were killed and 43 were arrested by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).³ In fact, Iraqi Kurdistan, with a population of five million inhabitants, has supplied ISIS with 2,000 jihadists⁴. Since the launch of the Mosul offensive on 17th October 2016,⁵ Kurdistan has been preparing itself, like many other countries in the region and a number of European countries, to face its worst nightmare: the Kurdish jihadists' return to the country. Although a series of threats weigh upon the leaders of the KRG, such as social and economic crises, political division between rival parties; Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK),⁶ the prospect of a new civil war, and the intervention of neighbouring countries – the return of the Kurds of Daesh is currently the most troublesome.

To understand this phenomenon and its impact on the KRG, a sociohistorical frame of reference is essential. Kurdish Jihadism has 37 years of turbulent history stretching behind it. It emerged in 1980 as

1. O. Weber, "L'exception kurde" [The Kurdish Exception], *Le Point*, 27th January 2005, www.lepoint.fr (accessed on 8th January 2017).

2. E. Rogan, *The Arabs: A History*, New York, Basic Books, 2011.

3. A. Bakawan, "Au Kurdistan irakien, la grande confrontation pourrait bien opposer forces chiïtes et kurdes" [Iraqi Kurdistan, the Great Confrontation Could Well Oppose Shi'ite and Kurdish Forces], *Le Monde*, 6th January 2017, www.lemonde.fr.

4. Since January 2015, I have been leading a research group on the Kurds of Daesh for the Dabran Foundation. The Foundation had built up a regularly updated database, which has been made available to us by the management team, within the scope of our research; which we are thankful for. Until now, we have identified the profiles of 257 Kurds of Daesh, but various departments of the KRG have confirmed to us that this group amounts to 2,000 individuals; a figure confirmed by Mala Bakhtyar, head of the Political Bureau of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, during an interview with him on 20th January 2017.

5. D. Papin J. Grandin, P. Breteau, L. Imbert and F. Fattori, "Comment la bataille contre l'État islamique s'organise-t-elle autour de Mossoul?" [Is the Battle against the Islamic State Organized around Mosul?], *Le Monde*, 17th October 2016, www.lemonde.fr.

6. S. Bahadin, "La division du Kurdistan et la guerre civile sont tout à fait possible" [The Possible Division of Kurdistan and the Civil War], *Rudaw*, 7th February 2017, www.rudaw.net. Debate meeting with Kurdish intellectuals.

one of the consequences of changes in the Islamic movement in Kurdistan.⁷ The birth of which has its origins in the 1950s in Halabja, a town located about 240 km north-east of Baghdad and 14 km from the Iranian border.⁸ For a long time, Kurdish Islamism was in the process of “Iraqisation”, embracing the total dominance of the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood. The Kurdish Brothers thought, spoke and lived as *Iraqis*, basing themselves on the model of their sworn enemy: the Iraqi Communist Party.⁹ Indeed, their objective was to return the society to Islamism from below, employing only one method; the *Da'wah*¹⁰ (call to Islam), with the mosque being the ideal place for this re-Islamisation to occur. From 1950-1980s, the dominant paradigm was not state control, revolution, jihad nor violence in general, but the reconstruction of Kurdish individuals according to a programme of religious socialisation meticulously developed in Baghdad by the Muslim Brotherhood and applied in full in the city of Halabja, the centre of Islamism in the Kurdistan region.¹¹

How did the ideologies of Kurdish Islamist key figures evolve, making them shift from the paradigm of the re-Islamisation of society from below, to that of state control through jihad? How are the jihadist generations of the 1980s, that of Ansar al-Islam in the 2000s and that of the Kurds of Daesh in the 2010s interconnected? The objective of this analysis is to compare the three generations of jihadist groups in Kurdistan and to determine the specific features of each generation's unique identity.¹² The threat of the third jihadist generation as perceived by the KRG and its strategy in the face of its “demons” will be discussed hereafter. Consequently, the agreement, sealed in 2001, between the United States and the KRG against the Kurdish and international jihadists will be subject to critical assessment. This agreement has twice saved the KRG from the

7. A. Bakawan, *L'Islamisme en mutation. Une étude pluridisciplinaire sur la mouvance islamiste kurde* [The Mutation of Islamism: A Multidisciplinary Study on the Kurdish Islamist Movement], Paris, EHESS, 2010 (Doctoral dissertation under the direction of Olivier Roy).

8. M. Karzan, *Jinosâdî Halabja le mydîa cihanîekanda* [The Halabja Genocide in the International Media], Sulaimani, Éditions Assya, 2016.

9. H. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

10. To comprehend this Quranic concept, read M. Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Dictionnaire du Coran* [Dictionary of the Quran], Paris, Robert Laffont, 2007, p. 69.

11. M. De Postis, “Le Kurdistan irakien : une autonomie contrôlée” [Iraqi Kurdistan: Controlled Autonomy], *Revue internationale et stratégique*, No. 1/2003 (Vol. 49), pp. 130-137.

12. This work is the outcome of more than ten years of field research on Islamism and Jihadism in Kurdistan. Several methodological techniques (interviews, observation, discourse analysis, archival analysis, quantitative data) have been deployed, because we are convinced that only the complementarity of the qualitative and quantitative approaches can lead to a cartography that closely reflects the reality of the individuals studied.

direct threat of jihadists: in 2003 against Ansar al-Islam and in 2014 against Daesh, resulting in the Kurdish security forces becoming structurally dependent on Washington; a reliance that highlights the extreme fragility of the KRG.

The First Jihadist Generation in Iraqi Kurdistan

From the Islamisation of the Kurdish question to the “Kurdistanisation” of the Islamic question

In 1979, three major factors affected the ideology, paradigm and organisation of Kurdish Islamism. That year, Saddam Hussein became President of the Iraqi Republic. From that very moment he deployed unprecedented political violence¹³, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) were among his first victims. In Saddam Hussein’s mind, the Muslim Brothers were considered a Sunni threat, sharing the same social basis as his own Ba’ath Party, which resulted in his obsession to eradicate them. At the peak of this repression, two major events changed the course of 30 years of Islamic involvement for the Kurdish branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (IMK): the declaration of a jihad against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan¹⁴ and the founding of the Islamic Republic in Iran.¹⁵

When jihad was declared by the Afghans, all components of the International Organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood (IOMB) put themselves in order to provide support.¹⁶ First of all, the IOMB’s media outlets officially recognised the legitimacy of the Afghan call for jihad and broadcast the message throughout the world. Then, financial networks of the IOMB were set up in jihad territory and began working on multiple projects. Finally, the Brothers were permitted to join “the caravan of jihad”.¹⁷ The IMK were inspired by this multifaceted support approach: the

13. K. Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq Updated Edition*, Berkeley (CA), University of California Press, 1998. Also see M. Naïm, “Saddam Hussein, le pouvoir par la terreur” [Saddam Hussein: Power through Terror], *Le Monde*, 30th December 2006, www.lemonde.fr (accessed on 10th February 2017).

14. O. Roy, *L’Afghanistan. Islam et modernité politique* [Afghanistan: Islam and Political Modernity], Paris, Seuil, 1985.

15. F. Khosrokhavar, *Anthropologie de la révolution iranienne : le rêve impossible* [Anthropology of the Iranian Revolution: The Impossible Dream], Paris, L’Harmattan, 2000.

16. J.-P. Filiu, *Les Neuf Vies d’Al-Qaïda* [Al-Qaeda’s Nine Lives], Paris, Fayard, 2009.

17. A. Azzam, known as the federator of the Afghans and the Afghan jihad theorist, is one of the leaders of the MB. His main work, *Join the Caravan*, which has been translated into several languages, asks the younger Brothers not to delay and join the jihad caravan in Afghanistan as soon as they can. See excerpts from this book in: G. Kepel, *Al-Qaïda dans le texte* [Al-Qaeda in its Own Words], Paris, PUF, 2008.

leaders of the IOMB met in the 1980s in Dubai to promote the idea of a jihad against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but the IOMB rejected this possibility and went so far as to threaten the IMK with exclusion. Kurdistan is not Afghanistan, it is part of Iraq, and even if Saddam Hussein's regime oppresses the MB in Iraq, it represents the only credible resistance to the expansion of Shi'ite domination over the Sunnis. Destabilising it would therefore be a "sin".¹⁸ Shocked by this tactical approach to the Iraq situation, the majority of the IMK opted for confrontation with the IOMB. They put the Kurdish question forward for the first time by comparing it to the Afghan cause, assimilating the Ba'ath regime to an "infidel"¹⁹ regime occupying Kurdistan, and comparing it to the communist regime occupying Afghanistan.

These conflicting narratives quickly led to a paradigm shift: the IMK moved from the tactic of returning society to Islamism from below, via the *Da'wah*, to a programme to liberate Kurdistan from the regime, inspired directly by the Afghan jihad (people at war for their liberation), to end up with the establishment of a Kurdish/Sunni Islamic republic, inspired by the model provided by their neighbour, Iran. Jihadist scholars of this era began looking to Islamic traditions, especially in the Quran and Sunnah, for a source of legitimacy for a "national" jihad destined to liberate a "nation" oppressed by an "oppressive"²⁰ power.

This new paradigm adopted by the IMK, from the soft *Da'wah* to radical Jihadism, from re-Islamisation from below to re-Islamisation from above, from education to revolution, from the construction of the Muslim individual to the construction of the Islamic State, also caused an organisational divorce. The figures involved in this jihad generation, who felt betrayed by their Arab Brothers, cut off any organisational and hierarchical ties with the IOMB, even before the latter took the initiative to formally exclude them. A key figure told of the rupture:

"In 1987, Othman Abdul-Aziz, the head of the Kurdish Muslim Brothers, who had become the supreme leader of the Kurdish jihad movement, received a final letter from the IOMB asking him to abandon the Jihad he had declared against Saddam Hussein's Iraq which was at war with Khomeini's Shi'ite Iran.

18. Interview with Mushir Galali, one of the leaders of the Kurdish jihadists of the first generation, who now resides in London, September 25, 2009.

19. Fatih Krekar (known as Mollah Krekar) is one of the theoreticians of Kurdish jihadism. In his book, *Al Haraka al Islamia fi Kurdistan al Irak [Islamic Movement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq]* (Iraqi Kurdistan, IMK, 1995), he adopted the project of radical Islamism and "Kurdistanisation".

20. Interview with Abou Bakr Ali, one of the most famous intellectuals of the Brother's Islamist movement in Kurdistan, on 22nd April 2016, in Sulaimani.

Othman Abdul-Aziz read the letter out loud in front of the members of his political office, then ripped the first line apart that began with “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful”, and threw the rest to his feet stating: “I am a jihadist Muslim Kurd. I am a free man; they cannot give me orders”.²¹

This caused an ideological, paradigmatic and organisational split, thus the history of the first jihadist generation of Kurds commenced. What were their main features?

Firstly, their general leadership was placed under the control of the Islamic *ulema* (Sunni theologians). In Kurdish tradition, to become an *alim* (scholar), one must pass through the religious schools, referred to as Kurdish *hujra*, where 12 different disciplines are studied, from learning the Quran to philosophy. The *ulema* (plural of *alim*) supervised militant jihadist activities closely; they were a guarantee to the people that Islamism was being observed. This leadership was comprised exclusively of men between the ages of 45 and 60. The militant base was filtered through the ideology of re-Islamisation; devout and engaged, it has a clear vision of its action. While women were completely absent from the general leadership component,²² the militant base of this generation was quite mixed: “It is true that we did not observe women on the front-line, with weapons in hand, but they had a responsibility for the rest of our jihadist action”²³. The university education of the militants was another remarkable feature. While the majority of the members of the general management were the product of the *Hujra* (Islamic schools), an overall majority of militants came from schools of the Republic. Educated from Degree to PhD level, often in exact sciences, they understood perfecting for which society and against what power they were pursuing jihad. Ultimately, they rejected terrorism as a weapon of combat, recognising a clear divide between the scope of jihad and that of terrorism:

“We were at war with the army of the Ba’athist regime, not against society, that is why we never killed a civilian, never planted a car bomb or bombs in the streets, we didn’t even take any hostages, we wanted an Islamic State, not a terrorist state.”²⁴

21. Interview with Irfan Abdulaziz, the current head of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, which is part of the KRG and has a seat in Parliament, on 22th September 2016, in Sulaimani.

22. In accordance with Kurdish tradition, women do not have the right to be *alim* in a religious sense: to direct collective prayer in a mosque, or deliver the Friday sermon.

23. Interview with Mushir Galali, *op. cit* [18].

24. Interview with Irfan Abdulaziz, *op. cit* [21].

Twenty years later, terrorism would become the main weapon for the jihadists of the second and third generations.

In the war against the Iraqi state in the 1980s, Kurdish jihadists positioned in the mountains on both sides of the Iraqi-Iranian border, grouped around the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan (Bzotnawa²⁵), suddenly found themselves in 1991, in a Kurdistan that had been liberated from the Iraqi “occupation”²⁶. Within this territory, which was no sooner being run by a regional Government of Kurdistan,²⁷ two conflicting plans were brought face to face. The first was the Bzotnawa jihadists’ Islamism plan, whose objective was to return the society to Islamism in response to the Kurdish question; and the other, was that of the nationalists of the Jalal Talabani’s PUK and Masoud Barzani’s KDP, who had embarked on a process of establishing Kurdish identity in the place of Islamism. For a century, the Kurdish question had been raised by nationalist figures, from Sherif Pasha²⁸ to Masoud Barzani, who had established a sophisticated system for the process of sacralising symbols. The aim of the jihadists was to take ownership of this system and transform it to their advantage, to increase Islamisation in response to the Kurdish question and to become representatives of the national cause, as the Afghan jihadists had done in their own context. However, the Kurdish jihadists were faced with a group of nationalists who, not only put obstacles in place to prevent the realisation of this dream to return the society to Islamism, but also wanted to assert “Kurdistanisation” over Islamism. Aware of the influence of Islam on the map, the Kurdish nationalists did not wish to wipe out the first generation of jihadists, but to adopt them, through their integration into the political system of the KRG.²⁹

The instigators of these two conflicting plans competed with each other ideologically, in conferences, debates, meetings; and also in armed confrontations, in the form of two periods of Civil War between 1993 and

25. A. Bakawan, doctoral dissertation, *op. cit* [7].

26. Interview with Salahadin Bahadin, head of the Islamic union of Kurdistan (Yekgirtu), in Erbil, on 20th September 2013. A foreign observer may be surprised to learn that Kurdish Islamists view their Sunni Arab Brothers as occupiers, but this discourse does in fact reflect the reality of the first generation of jihadists.

27. On the conditions of the liberation of Kurdistan in 1991, refer to C. Kutschera, *Le Défi kurde ou le rêve fou de l'indépendance* [Kurdish Defiance or the Crazy Dream for Independence], Paris, Bayard Jeunesse, 1997.

28. Sherif Pasha (1865-1951) was a political actor who represented the Kurdish people at the start of the 20th century in Europe, particularly in Paris. Refer to C. Kutschera, *Le Mouvement national kurde* [The Kurdish National Movement], Paris, Flammarion, 1992.

29. Interview with Mala Bakhtyar, head of the Political Bureau of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, in Paris, 20th January 2017.

1996. During this period, the armed forces of Jalal Talabani's PUK destroyed all of the jihadist military bases, their supreme leader Othman Abdul-Aziz was captured and more than 1,000 fighters were killed.³⁰

It should also be noted that the south of Iraqi Kurdistan is an area where Iran holds influence, in particular, it monitors and accompanies its political evolution: stabilisation, pacification and control of this region are vital for Iranian national security. Iran was an ally of both the first generation jihadists and the Talabani-led PUK, secular and nationalist; thus, the Islamic Republic was involved in the process of pacification of the relations between the jihadists and Kurdish nationalists, encouraging the integration of jihadists into the KRG, who bid farewell to their original dream: the foundation of an Islamic State in Kurdistan. They then went on to become ministers, Chief Executives of the Ministries, deputies...³¹: and the project of Kurdish nationalism triumphed over the Islamist movement.

30. These figures were provided by Mushir Galali, leader of the Kurdish jihadists of the first generation.

31. The head of the military office Abdel Star Majid became Minister of Agriculture; The Kurdish jihadist theorist Ali Bapir became a deputy of the Iraqi National Assembly; Marwan Galali, the most radical man of this generation, became president of the parliamentary group of Komal, the organization that brings together the majority of the former jihadists. See the official website of the KRG: <http://cabinet.gov.krd>.

The Second Generation of Jihadists

The transition to international Jihadism

The failure of the Islamisation programme in Kurdistan and the integration of the first generation's main figures into a political system forged by the KDP and the PUK, gave rise to the radicalisation of a new group of individuals. Derived from the initial, but under-represented, Islamist framework, these were individuals who categorically rejected "surrendering" before the Nationalists and wished to radicalise jihadist action based on the model of Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda. Mullah Krekar, an ideologist familiar with Afghan jihad and whom worked with Abdullah Azzam³² for several years, embodied this new form of radicalisation.³³

On 1 September 2001 these radicals, who had left Bzotnawa, regrouped under a new organization appointed Jund al-Islam ("Soldiers of Islam"). Ten days later, on 11th September 2001, members of al-Qaeda committed major attacks on New York and Washington. On 7th October 2001, U.S. military operations were launched against the Taliban breaking ground in Afghanistan.³⁴ On 5th December 2001, Jund al-Islam merged with Mullah Krekar's group to form the Ansar al-Islam organisation.³⁵ The most significant trademark of this new organisation was its method: for the first time in the modern history of Iraqi Kurdistan an organisation had adopted terrorism as a weapon of combat and implemented it in a

32. Abdallah Azzam is known internationally as the theorist of the Afghan jihad. For more information, see J.-P. Filiu, *op. cit.* [16].

33. Born in 1961, Krekar, whose real name is Najm al-Din Faraj, is part of a large family (seven brothers and four sisters) of modest social background (his father was a policeman and his mother a housewife). At 17, he became a Peshmerga for the KDP. After the failure of Mustafa Barzani's revolt in 1975, Krekar followed the path of the Kurdish Muslim Brotherhood (IMK). In the mid-1980s, he emigrated first to Iran and then to Pakistan where he taught at Abu Bakr Salafi University. Back in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, he became part of the jihad of the first generation while trying to radicalize it. In 2001, he became the leader of Ansar Al-Islam and was arrested in 2002 by the Iranian authorities at Tehran airport and transferred to Norway. He is currently under house arrest in Norway, where he lost his status as a political refugee (acquired in 1990). His host country is waiting for the situation to stabilize in Iraq to expel him from the territory. See Krekar's interview with the Standard Review, in the Kurdish language, Erbil, 18th August 2008.

34. J.-C. Jauffret, *Afghanistan 2001-2010*, Paris, Autrement, 2010.

35. A. Bakawan, *Binakrdni komelayetyanei tyrorysm [The Social Construction of Terrorism]*, Sulaimani, Sardam, 2007, p. 360.

spectacular way (placing hostages in front of cameras, suicide bombings, car bombs, etc.³⁶).

Thus, were we witnessing the emergence of a second generation of jihadists? A significant portion of Ansar al-Islam derived from Othman Abdul-Aziz's Bzotnawa, however Krekar was the only member who held a position in the general leadership. The *ulema* who were in control of the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan regularly excluded radicals from their general leadership for two main reasons: their low level of education in religious sciences and their age, as they were considered too young to take on significant responsibilities.³⁷ However, in the chaotic context of Kurdistan in the 1990s (Civil War, economic crisis, widespread corruption, unprecedented disparities of wealth and poverty between social classes, rapid opening to the outside world)³⁸, those excluded from general leadership succeeded in setting up several training camps in which the second generation of fighters were trained.

Unlike the members of the first generation's leadership, none of the senior executives of Ansar al-Islam were a product of the *hujra*, nor were they identified as Islamic scholars. At most, some of them were described as "Islamic intellectuals"³⁹; they did in fact hold a literalist knowledge of Salafi Jihadism summarised in some simplistic textbooks. Fighters were instructed to apply the religious programme precisely as it was set out in these textbooks. Our database reveals that the senior officers of this generation were between 25 and 36 years of age (with the exception of two people), while 74% of the militant base were in the age group of 14-28 years. Whereas women were very present in the first generation militant base, the Salafi jihadists of the second generation categorically refused to give women any form of visibility, and assigned them to the home. But the element that differentiates this group the most from the first generation is the absence of any reference to Kurdishness: what happened in Kurdistan was merely seen as an episode in the big soap opera of international jihad. With Ansar al-Islam, we shifted from Othman Abdul-Aziz's paradigm of national jihad, to Osama bin Laden's paradigm of international jihad. It

36. Refer to the press release of Ansar al-Islam, published in the weekly paper, *Hawlati*, No. 53, on 24th December 2001

37. Interview with Mushir Galali, *op. cit.* [18].

38. É. Picard, "Les Kurdes et l'autodétermination. Une problématique légitime à l'épreuve de dynamiques sociales" [Kurds and Self-Determination: A Legitimate Problem Facing the Test of Social Dynamics], *Revue française de Science politique*, Paris, Vol. 49, No. 3, 1999, pp. 421-442.

39. D. Bénichou, F. Khosrokhavar and P. Migaux, *Le Jihadisme. Le comprendre pour mieux le combattre* [Jihadism: Understanding it to Fight it More Effectively], Paris, Plon, 2015, p. 114.

was in this sense that in 2002 Ansar al-Islam officially merged with and became the Kurdistan branch of al-Qaeda.

An ideological shift: the transition from the traditional Kurdish *ulema* form of Islam to the Islam of jihadist-Salafism. A paradigm shift: From jihad on a national level to its internationalisation. An organisational shift: the evolution from Bzotnawa (local register) to al-Qaeda (global register) makes the emergence of Ansar al-Islam a turning point in the organisation of Jihadism in Kurdistan.⁴⁰

It must be noted that the massive influx of al-Qaeda jihadists into Byara in early 2002,⁴¹ after the destruction of their base in Afghanistan by the Americans, is indicative of the globalisation of Kurdish jihadism and its strengthening, a disturbing reality for both the KRG and the U.S.A. Two prominent figures represent the *Hijrah* (migration) of jihadists to a Kurdistan which was considered to be the new land of international jihad: Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and Abu Wa'el. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, led by the U.S. Army, Al-Zarqawi would become the leader of radical Jihadism in Iraq and the most wanted man on earth alongside Osama bin Laden.⁴² In contrast, during his stay in Kurdistan, with the jihadists of Ansar al-Islam, he remained discreet and provided support behind the scenes only: no media appearance, no speeches in front of supporters, nor willingness to impose his leadership on the management of Ansar. As for Abu Wa'el, who was officially appointed as liaison between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein by Washington, his presence in the zone would come to be a mystery or even a myth. The United States presented him as evidence of the Iraqi regime's cooperation with an international terrorist organisation – which facilitated in legitimising its dissolution. But did Abu Wa'el really form a bridge between the secular dictator and the Salafi jihadist? Abu Wa'el, real name Saadoun Mahmoud al-Ani, a Sunni Arab with a University education (Faculty of Law), joined the intelligence services of the Iraqi regime in the early 1980s. After the defeat of the Iraqi Army in 1991 against the allies, he and many others left Iraq under Saddam Hussein's reign for al-Qaeda's Afghanistan. Given his experience in the intelligence field, he quickly became a key figure in Osama bin Laden's

40. A. Bakawan, *op. cit.* [35].

41. For a good visualization of the deployment of the second generation of jihadists in southern Iraqi Kurdistan, notably in the Hawraman region, see the map of the Kurdish jihadists created in collaboration the cartography service of the daily newspaper *Le Monde*, 6th January, 2007, www.lemonde.fr.

42. The reward promised by the United States for the capture of Zarqawi, dead or alive, ended up matching the \$25 million assigned for that of bin Laden in 2004. Refer to J.-P. Filiu, *op. cit.* [16], p. 157; X. Raufer, "L'État islamique, objet terroriste non identifié" [The Islamic State: An Unidentified Terrorist Object], *Outre-Terre*, No. 3/2015 (Vol. 44), pp. 31-44.

organisation.⁴³ A great orator⁴⁴ with a very good command of the Quran and Sunnah, an imposing character both physically and intellectually, Abu Wa'el had the necessary skills to become a leader. Following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, he resumed the path to Iraq towards the town of Byara where Mullah Krekar had his headquarters, where he found his battle companion Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He later left Ansar al-Islam in 2003 to create a new organisation, Ansar al-Sunna. To date, we have no evidence that he fulfilled the role of liaison between the Ba'athist regime and al-Qaeda – however, this has not prevented Washington⁴⁵ from advancing this allegation to legitimise their occupation of Iraq.

It is on this pretence that the U.S. Army planned Operation Viking Hammer to carry out the invasion of Byara. On 21st March 2003, American cruise missiles strikes rained on the territory which was under the control of the second generation of jihadists. U.S. Special Forces,⁴⁶ accompanied by several thousand Peshmergas from the Talabani-led PUK, mounted an assault on jihadist positions; Byara fell into the hands of the Americans and the Kurds on 1 April 2003. Around 200 jihadists were killed and 700 retreated to Iran.⁴⁷ A few months later, they returned to Iraq and joined the Iraqi al-Qaeda organisation Iraq, established by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

43. Information gathered from a database of the Dabran Foundation, based in Sulaimani.

44. One of his speeches can be heard on 15th June 2010 via the following link: <https://archive.org> (accessed 19th February 2017).

45. On 20th February 2003, Eric Leser, analyzing the speech of US Secretary of State Colin Powell on the possible link between Baghdad and Byara, wrote: "An Iraqi, known as Abu Wa'el would serve as liaison between Ansar Al-Islam and the secret services of Baghdad. However, this is a disputed link even within the CIA. And for Robert Malley, director of the Middle East program of the International Crisis Group, there is no doubt that this group has brought a lot of unhappiness to the area it controls. But it is a region that is not in the hands of Baghdad and we see no evidence of a strategic alliance with Saddam Hussein" in "Les islamistes kurdes d'Ansar Al-Islam peuvent être liés à Al-Qaïda" [Kurdish Islamists of Ansar Al-Islam May Be Linked to Al-Qaeda], *Le Monde*, 8th February 2003, www.lemonde.fr (accessed 20 February 2017).

46. B. Philip, "Les États-Unis ont ouvert un front nord au Kurdistan" [The United States Have Opened a Northern Front in Kurdistan], *Le Monde*, 25th March 2003, www.lemonde.fr (accessed on 20th February 2017).

47. C. Kutschera, "L'ascension d'Ansar Al-Islam" [The Rise of Ansar al-Islam], RFI, 16th March 2004, www1.rfi.fr (accessed on 20th February 2017).

The Third Generation of Jihadists

The Kurds of Daesh

While the Iraq ran by Paul Bremer, the new “Master of Baghdad”⁴⁸, drowned in violence and insecurity, Iraqi Kurdistan “cleansed” of its radical demons experienced remarkable stability and security. With an economic growth of 12%, largely due to the oil windfall – which constituted 94% of its economy, the KRG quickly established itself as the privileged interlocutor between foreign parties, on a both a political and economical level. Almost 800 foreign corporations were established there, 500 of which originated from neighbouring Turkey, but also from the United States (Exxon Mobil, Chevron) and Europe (Total, Schneider, Carrefour, Lafarge, Auchan), thanks, in particular, to a very generous investment law, in force since 2006.⁴⁹ Although the websites of western Foreign Ministries discouraged their fellow citizens from travelling to Iraq, Kurdistan escaped this restraint because it was labelled the “new Dubai” of Iraq.⁵⁰ Some thirty countries in the region, as well as European countries, began opening consulates⁵¹ there. During this period, Iraqi Kurdistan even became, for the first time in its history, a land of refuge for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa;⁵² it is also the first time that Kurdish immigrants who settled in Western countries began returning in droves to invest and participate in the development of their region of origin.

Iraqi Kurdistan, a century-long war zone, had been transformed into an area which attracted tourists, not only the Iraqi Arabs wearied by the attacks, but also tourists from other countries, including Iranians in search

48. P.-J. Luizard, “Irak : du premier au second mandat. L’effondrement d’un système postcolonial”, *Le Débat*, No. 126, 4/2003, pp. 62-75.

49. “Au Kurdistan Irakien, Erbil vit son boom loin des bombes” [In Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil Is Experiencing a Boom away from the Bombs], AFP, 23rd June 2013, www.institutkurde.org (accessed on 25th February 2017).

50. N. Woolf, “Is Kurdistan the Next Dubai?”, *The Guardian*, 5th May 2010, www.theguardian.com (accessed on 25th February 2017).

51. In 2013, the number of consulates in Erbil rose to 33. Refer to the KRG’s official website <http://cabinet.gov.krd>.

52. Prior to the 2003 occupation, the presence of black Africans was rare in Iraqi Kurdistan. From 2005 onwards it became a socio-economic phenomenon which we observed during our field research.

of a safe place for sex and alcohol⁵³. This is also the time opposition began to take shape coinciding with the overture of the KRG's political system. Elections were held regularly and Parliament became a place of constant debate between different parties. In 2013, the seating was divided in the following way: 38 seats for the PDK, 24 for Goran, 18 for the PUK, 10 for Yekgirtu, 6 seats for Komal and 1 for Bzotnawa.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, the regional framework was undergoing profound change. Since the end of 2010, the Arab world was experiencing a series of revolts, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and in Sunni Iraq, some of which were centred around the revolution. These events disrupted the entire regional system which had, up until then, been based on set of fixed intra-and inter-state power relations. Consequently, a public discourse began emerging in the Arab world and also in the West, about the birth of a “new man”, a democrat, secular and westernised, who calls into question the predicament of being the only exception in an Islamic region⁵⁵. It was difficult to imagine that this new man's intuition would be embodied in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the future caliph of Daesh. It was, however, the figure of al-Baghdadi, a hyper-radicalised individual, who would be placed on the scene in the medium term. In Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya –and even in Egypt and Tunisia, this figure propelled the period of revolution into a period in which the dream could be realised; the installation of the caliphate. On 10 June 2014, Mosul, the largest Sunni Iraqi city, fell to Daesh; on the 29th of the same month, al-Baghdadi was appointed as the Caliph of all Muslims in the world.⁵⁶

Kurdish society, like other societies, was directly affected by the collapse, not only of the states, but also of the societies across the Middle East. From February 2011, major youth protests were organised against the KRG; clashes occurred with rioting forces, the protests were met with

53. In 2012, the number of tourists in Kurdistan reached two million. Refer to R. Aziz, “Les touristes au Kurdistan” [Tourists in Kurdistan], Rudaw, 28th January 2014, www.rudaw.new (accessed on 25th February 2017).

54. Goran, Movement of Change (founded in 2009, led by Nawshirwan Mustafa); Yekgirtu, Islamic Union of Kurdistan (branch of the Kurdish Muslim Brotherhood, 1994); Komal, Islamic Group of Kurdistan (200, Ali Bapir); Bzotnawa, Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (1987). For the detailed report on the number of seats of each party, refer to the official website of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament: www.kurdistan-parliament.org.

55. Z. Yahia, “Les révolutions du monde arabe : la fin du mythe de l'exception” [The Revolutions in the Arab World: The End of the Myth of Exception], *Maghreb- Machrek*, Vol. 4/2011 (No. 210), pp. 49-60. Also see H. Ben Hammouda, “L'orientalisme et les révolutions tunisienne et égyptienne : pourquoi ne l'ont-ils pas aimée la révolution?” [Orientalism and the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions: Why Did they Reject the Revolution?], *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 2/2011 (No. 77), pp. 63-74.

56. P.-J. Luizard, *Le piège Daech. L'État islamique ou le retour de l'Histoire*, Paris, La Découverte, 2015.

violence and crushed by the Peshmergas,⁵⁷ and we witnessed the arrival of a new jihadist generation. In early 2012, Kurdish security officials were concerned about Kurdish youths taking off to join the scene in Syria; in 2013, departures were organised on a regular basis; as early as 2014, the existence of the Kurds of Daesh was considered a major threat, both domestically and abroad, for the KRG. In 2016, Iraqi Kurdistan was shaken by a series of different attacks: car bombs, suicide bombings, isolated bombs, etc. At the end of the same year, 249 Kurds of Daesh tried to control the city of Kirkuk, weapons in hand, in contrast to the previous year, in 2013, when only two jihadists had attempted attacks in Kurdistan. In 2013, only two Daesh Kurds had been killed within the borders of the KRG; in 2016, this number rose to 47.⁵⁸

Who are the Kurds of Daesh: an extension of the second generation of jihadists or even a breakaway generation? What is the estimated number of jihadists in this generation, how are they radicalised, and to what degree has this radicalisation been filtered through the lens of Salafism? The KRG must now address the threat posed by these children of the nation who have converted to the other side: could the return of these Kurdish jihadists destabilise the political and economic system of the KRG?

In early August 2014, the KRG shared 1,025 kilometres of borders with Daesh. To complicate things further, around 2,000 young Kurds opted to be activists among the soldiers of the new caliph, al-Baghdadi, however, as Sunni Arabs this committed them to the fight against their own society and their own government.

This new jihadist generation is, on several levels, different from the previous two. Firstly, in both Botswana and Ansar al-Islam, we were able to recognise the charismatic leaders embodying jihad. However, one of the significant features of this new generation is precisely the absence of a unifying leader: one cannot identify among them a similar figure to Othman Abdul-Aziz, a man of great reference for Kurdish Sunni Islam, nor anyone like Mullah Krekar, a theorist of radical Islamism who could rally the crowd around Qutbism ideology.⁵⁹ Another major difference is the

57. For French readers, on the challenge of the new Kurdish generation faced by the KRG, see: A. Quesnay, "Le mouvement de protestation au Kurdistan irakien" [The Protest Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan], *Noria*, 17th March 2012. www.noria-research.com (accessed on 26th February 2017).

58. All of the data presented in this section was provided by the database on the Kurds of Daesh, established with the support of the Dabran Foundation based in Sulaimani.

59. Sayyid Qotb (1906-1966), developed a set of theses on the territory of Islam and the territory of disbelief. It is the leading reference of jihadist leaders since his hanging on 29th August 1966 by Gamal Abdul Nasser. See: G. Kepel, *Jihad, op. cit.* [19].

breeding ground for radicalisation. While the first and second generation militants were radicalised in mosques known for their radical Islamist movements (a Jihad-focused mosque in Sulaimani, Ibn Taymiyyah Mosque in Halabja, etc.), the third generation militants are radicalised through Facebook. On a cultural level, the militants have evolved in the following way: while their predecessors learned the Qur'an and Sunnah, sources that legitimised their jihadist actions, this religious culture is absent in the third-generation of militants. They do not speak Arabic and do not care to learn it. In Kurdistan, Arabic, like English, is a foreign language taught at school; however, 83% of these new jihadists have no qualifications. Therefore, they do not know Arabic and thus have no access to the Quran or the Sunnah, due to the Kurds aversion to translating sacred texts.⁶⁰ Little is known about their social origins and activities: 27% of them are unemployed, 41% are workers or employees, 25% students, and only 7% of them occupied a position in the civil service before committing to Daesh. Another remarkable feature is their age: they are extremely young, 75% of them are aged 14 to 29.

In terms of ideology, we are faced with a total void: 68% of the members of this Facebook generation never connected with an Islamist or secular ideology before their encounter with Daesh.⁶¹ According to our surveys, only 23% of them have passed through a minimal level of Salafism ideology, which is conveyed in the way they dress: a beard, a cap and a *qamîs* that stops just above the ankles.⁶² Their connection with the Islamist movements integrated into the political system of the KRG is also very weak: only 6% came through one of the three well-known Kurdish Islamist movements (Yekgirtu, Komal, Bzotnawa). This last fact allows us make a clear assertion about the hypothesis that transition through lawful Islamism is a quasi-prerequisite to enter into radicalism.⁶³

60. There are several translations of the Quran, but they have never been taken seriously by the Islamists.

61. It should be noted that in Iraqi Kurdistan, as in most Middle Eastern countries, the two Islamist/secular categories are used as the framework to decipher where participants belong. Secularism is not only a principle of law, but an ideological category, at war with Islamism. See: P.-J. Luizard, "Laïcités autoritaires en terre d'Islam" [Authoritarian Secularism in the Land of Islam], Paris, Fayard, 2008.

62. Interviews carried out by members of my team with these individuals, in the KRG prisons, demonstrated that for this category, Salafism is manifested in three symbols: a beard, a skullcap and a *qamîs* that stops just above the ankles. In contrast, they were rarely able to deliver a Quranic verse in Arabic.

63. A. Bakawan, "La déconversion des mouvements islamistes" [The Deconversion of Islamist Movements], conference on "Autoritarisme, terrorisme et démocratie au Moyen-Orient" [Authoritarianism, Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East], Paris, Senate, KESCC, 6th October 2016, www.senat.fr. During this conference, I was struck by the level of amalgamation of certain political commentators, as well as academics, between the Islamist actors integrated into the political system (Ennahdha in Tunisia or Yekgirtu in Kurdistan) and terrorist actors such as Daesh or al-Qaeda. It is true

This generation of young, uneducated, jihadists with no ideology, and a disadvantaged social background are gradually becoming a direct threat to the security and stability of the KRG, particularly after the military failures of Daesh in its current territories between Iraq and Syria. These newly radicalised youths have nothing to lose,⁶⁴ effectively; they are capable of carrying out attacks throughout the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan. From the most secure city of Erbil, to the last village on the Iraqi-Iranian border, passing through Sulaimani, Halabja, Darbandikhan, Ainkawa, Ranya, these new fighters with “nothing to lose” have a remarkable capacity for action. From 2013 to 2016, 287 third-generation terrorists conducted 14 major operations within the Kurdish territories governed by the KRG. They killed 37 people and wounded 135. The number of terrorists killed amounted to 56; while 60 were captured by the KRG security services. The operations carried out were diverse in nature: suicide bombing, car bombing, unanticipated attacks on institutions, political assassinations, etc.

The way that the KRG perceives and treats this threat is rapidly evolving. Several Kurdish figures who are in charge of handling terrorism in Kurdistan (ministers, deputies, chiefs of security in the two areas under PDK and PUK influence) have delivered their analyses on this point. Interviews revealed that repression by all possible means seems to be the only strategy adopted by the KRG, which does not give any importance to the matter of deradicalization. According to Masoud Barzani, the KRG spends 60% of its budget on the war against ISIS.⁶⁵ The two major intelligence agencies, Parastin and Zanyari,⁶⁶ receive a large portion of this budget; however, throughout the KRG territory, not a single scientific research centre exists for the study of radicalisation, terrorism, or violence, and even less so for an exit strategy from the violence.

that Islamists and terrorists share Islam; however, in the political mind of terrorists, the danger of the Islamist actors integrated into the political system is no less than that of the secular ones.

64. This observation of this belief of, “I have nothing to lose” comes up regularly in the interviews with the Kurds of Daesh in the KRG: 175 hours of words of jihadists, transcribed in Kurdish are available in our database.

65. Interview with Masoud Barzani, Rudaw, 23rd January 2017, www.rudaw.net (accessed on 24th January 2017).

66. The KDP and the PUK have shared the intelligence issue equally among one another. The KDP manages the Parastin agency and the PUK manage the Zanyari agency. Coordination between the two is very limited; they behave as if they were part of two different governments. There are even reports in the media of reciprocal accusations on very sensitive subjects between Masrour Barzani, Parastin’s president and younger son of Masoud Barzani, and Lahur Sheikh Jangi, Zanyari’s president and Jalal Talabani’s favorite nephew. For more information, see: www.youtube.com, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy interview with Lahur Talabani, 3rd November, 2015.

It is debatable whether this approach will be effective over time. In 2003, when Ansar's second generation of jihadist were militarily crushed and eliminated with the help of the American Special Forces, the KRG convinced itself that Jihadism in Kurdistan had been assigned to history and that Kurdish society had been cleansed of its jihadist "pathology"⁶⁷. Ten years later, the very same society has yielded a third generation of jihadists, the Kurds of Daesh, and their organisation is even larger than the second generation of Islamists: Ansar al-Islam only had 700 members; the Kurds of Daesh are close to 2,000.

67. Interview cited with Mala Bakhtyar. The words in quotation marks were spoken by Mala Bakhtyar and perfectly reflect the political culture of the Kurdish ruling class.

Conclusion

What leads the citizens of Kurdistan to become jihadists? This question is all the more justifiable because, in the great narrative of the Kurdish nationalists,⁶⁸ “Kurdish people” are generally portrayed as victims of the Islamic invasion 1,400 years ago: they were converted to Islam under the threat of the sword, and today their territory is occupied by Arab Muslims (in Iraq and Syria), Turks (Turkey) and Persians (Iran). Much like their peers of early Islam, Muslims of the modern world returned, in the name of the same religion, to finish their work of destroying the Kurdish people through Operation Anfal (the Kurdish genocide ordered by Saddam Hussein). These same Muslims used weapons of mass destruction in Halabja and annihilated 2,000 Kurdish villages in Iraq alone. In the 1970s, Kurdish nationalists developed an official rhetoric against the Iraqi Arabs: according to the word of the people: “We no longer want your Quran, we will return it to you on the back of a camel.”

In this same narrative, picked up by the majority of Western countries, the Kurds are depicted as friendly and secular people, engaged in the global war against Islamic terrorism. Some even speak of the Kurdish “exception” in the Middle East.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, there is still a considerable void between the great narrative built on the ideologies of nationalists and the reality of Kurdish society. We have explored this divergence in various contexts in other articles.⁷⁰ Therefore, we continue to question the relevance and credibility of this account: if this is the reality of Kurdish society, how can we explain the 37-year history of Jihadism in Kurdistan, the pervasive presence of jihadist notions from one generation to the next, the passage of militants from Bzotnawa to Ansar and, or Daesh?

Kurdish nationalist media outlets are leveraged to mitigate the Kurdish origins of these jihadists: “They are not real Kurds” or “they come from elsewhere”. This denial avoids dealing with the facts. However, we

68. A. Ali, *Le Nationalisme kurde* [Kurdish Nationalism], Erbil, Rojhalat, 2008.

69. O. Weber, *op. cit.*, [1]

70. A. Bakawan, “L'échec du nationalisme kurde : fragmentation, partisanisation, milicisation” [The Failure of Kurdish Nationalism: Fragmentation, Partisanism, Militisation], *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 1/2017 (No. 100), pp. 89-100.

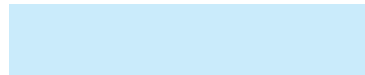
must acknowledge that Jihadism has been consistently entrenched in Kurdish society. The Kurdish jihadists do not come from Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia, but from the depths of Kurdish society: they are the children of the same people, born in the same towns and villages. Their only language, particularly in the third generation, is Kurdish, and they were educated in the schools of the KRG, even if they failed to obtain any qualifications. These militant jihadists are indeed an integral part of an Iraqi Kurdish society which, at 94%, has been a Sunni Muslim society for more than a century. In reality, Islam is the regulatory principle of this society in terms of its thought patterns and the framework for its actions.

However, this principle is pluralistic in nature, it can be configured, but at the same time it is configured according to the realities of its representatives. There is a dynamic link between jihadists and Islam: it is in the name of Islam that the Kurds of Daesh are trapped and blown up in cars. However, this link is a *situational* construction, rather than a *structural* one. Islam does not speak; it is spoken in the trajectory of its followers. But this trajectory is interacting with and provoking a culture of violence in Kurdish society, in the past and present: for a century at least, Kurdistan has been a territory of fire and blood, the front line of war between Kurdish nationalists and several other states in the region. Since the dawn of the revolutions in the Arab world, it has periodically been the scene of conflicts between Kurdish youth and its governmental forces. It also draws in new forms of violence spread predominantly through social networks: the jihadists imaginations are overwhelmed with Hollywood scenes of violence. Along with all of these factors, the emergence of new social classes, the tragic implementation of the mechanisms of social exclusion and marginalization (a whole generation condemned to living in the streets, without hope or education, fragile and precarious⁷¹) are the building blocks for the trajectory of the Kurdish jihadists. And finally, the integration of the three major Islamist movements (Yekgirtu, Komal, Botswana) into the political system of the KRG has disappointed and will continue to disappoint many Islamist figures who believed they were giving new meaning to their lives in radicalism. The fact that Islamists, who are

71. In 2008, as the KRG's economic development grew, we headed a research group in Kurdistan on youth and its relationship with the political world. From Zakho to Halabja, to Dahuk, Erbil, Kirkuk and Sulaimani, we interviewed 5,366 people. To the question: "Which of the following actors is best placed to represent your interests?" 91% of respondents thought that political parties were not well positioned to represent their interests; 96% thought it was the same with Parliament and the government; 21% trusted the trade unions. The results of the research were published in a book in Kurdish: A. Bakawan, Komalgâirech [The Black Society], Sulaimani, Andesha Publishing, 2013.

often very young, leave political parties to join the Islamic State or al-Qaeda is rather a sign that the first generation Islamist movements were successfully integrated into the Kurdish political system. For this reason, the nationalists regularly accuse them of having made militants capable of integrating into terrorist organizations...

In any case, the eight causes of radicalization of Kurdish youth, cited above (Islam, culture of violence, globalization of violence, social networks, revolutions in the Arab world, social exclusion and the integration of Islamist movements into the political system), should be subject to further analysis, which we hope to work towards in the future.



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