

Islamists in Kurdistan: Challenges and Aspirations

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Feb 7, 2017

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Brief Analysis

February 7, 2017

Counter to what many believe, Islamists in Kurdistan are characterized by their openness to change and their intellectual and practical development. But challenges within and outside their parties, defined by political, economic, and administrative realities in the region, prevent them from playing an effective role in resolving problems.

The Islamist movement is an integral part of the social and political reality of Kurdistan. Islamist activists and parties, despite differences between them and other political parties, are a part of Kurdish society and thus share in the strengths and weaknesses of other actors.

Islamist parties have been through many changes during their history, namely, ideological programs for organizing their relations with foreign states and secular political parties at home and abroad. But rather than focusing on national issues, Islamist parties have tended to think in global Islamic terms, adopting slogans related to the global Islamic community – the ummah – as a whole, emphasizing Islamic identity more than their role as political parties.

Considering the pervasive economic, social, and political challenges across the Middle East, it is no surprise that the Islamist parties have become captive to bad practices. But over the past decade and a half, Kurdistan's Islamist parties have shown a unique ability to overcome many of their internal intellectual and practical problems – more so than some of their secular peers. In fact, many Kurdish secularists have caused more harm to Kurdish sovereignty and civil society than their Islamist counterparts have.

The Islamist parties have abandoned many of the principles they used to consider as fundamental to their aims, such as demands for an Islamic state and the implementation of Sharia law. Instead, they have called for a civilian constitution and transparent democracy.

But it is important for writers, academics, and the media, regardless of their ideological backgrounds, to play a positive role in helping these parties continue to mature by supporting them in their attempts to correct their paths to democracy

All the region's Islamist parties formed a joint list to participate in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s first elections in 1992. The list did not win a single seat and its candidate for president was not successful, but the parties

accepted the results. Some of the secular parties, on the other hand, rejected the outcome and quickly became mired in infighting.

The Islamist parties now call for the political process in Kurdistan to be organized along constitutional lines, with separation of powers and equality before the law. Once again, we can find examples of other, non-Islamist parties failing in this regard, violating the structure and principals of a modern state for more than a decade, for personal and party political gain, treading roughshod over national, civil and democratic principles.

The Islamists have good relations with other political parties in the KRG, whether secular, non-secular, Christian, or Turkoman.

They also have a relationship of understanding, within the framework of a general direction of the KRG, with many parties from Iraq and other states in the region, and with great powers, including the United States and European Union members. That is a positive development that shows that these parties are able to correct their paths in order to build relations with others.

That the experience of having Islamic parties running for elections -on a single list- with two other secular parties, reflected the intellectual transformation and the positive changes that those parties underwent.

However, the situation of the Islamists in Kurdistan has also helped create extremist groups and parties that are clearly terrorist organizations. These parties have adopted violence and coercion in the areas they influence, and have murdered foreign journalists and mutilated the corpses of Peshmerga fighters.

But it is important to note that violence is not unique to the Islamist parties but is also a key characteristic of secular parties, which have used any means of violence and coercion to achieve their goals against their rivals.

While Islamist parties in Kurdistan are an essential part of the parliament and the government, they should not bear the blame for the chronic problems faced by the Kurdish people at the present time. They are not part of the administrative and financial corruption that is gnawing away at the government, nor are they responsible for the failings of official institutions, nor the way the political parties have more power than the institutions, nor for the lack of judicial independence. Furthermore, the Islamist parties in Kurdistan have no armed militias. They are civilian parties whose headquarters are protected by police forces employed by and subject to the KRG.

There are some who accuse the region's Islamists of having no concrete political proposal for finding effective solutions to the challenges facing the KRG. That kind of accusation is not devoid of truth; however, is it reasonable to demand that political parties of any ideological shade do their job without giving them the constitutional and legal authority to do so? Haven't the opposition parties – including both Islamists and secularists – put forward political solutions to tackle problems and overcome challenges, programs welcomed by the public but which came to nothing because there was no opportunity for the exercise of political and partisan competition? How can political parties be called upon, in any country, to do their job in the absence of such a foundation?

I have no doubt that Islamist parties are still in urgent need of serious re-evaluation in many areas, such as their mixing of proselytization with political work, how they deal with the constants of Islamic law in politics, and their positions on converging social and religious issues.

But the Islamist parties of the KRG also realize that they have not done enough. This conviction pushes them to seek further positive changes. Given that many of the obstacles to development and better operation are external, the public, the media, and academics should support them so that they can play their role alongside the region's other parties and movements.



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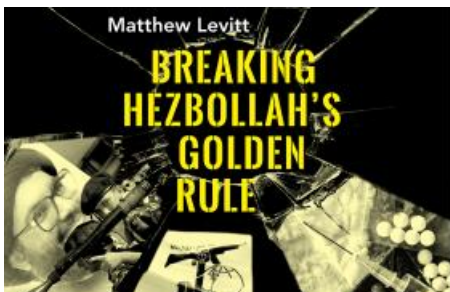
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