

# Islamists of Kurdistan: Contradictions Between Identity and Freedom

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Brief Analysis

**Kurdish Islamist factions may be able to participate more fully in political life, but they must first take a clear stance on religious and social freedoms.**

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During the last week of July, the top leaders from major Kurdish Islamist political parties, including the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), and the Kurdistan Islamic Movement (KIM), convened at the house of Salaheddine Bahaaeddin -- the secretary-general of the KIU -- in Sulaymaniyah. The meeting sought to establish the right conditions to create a shared Islamic front between the three parties, which together have 17 of 111 seats in the Kurdistan parliament.

These steps toward rapprochement among Kurdish Islamists came at a time when the geography of Islamist movements started undergoing fundamental changes not only in Kurdistan but in the entire Islamic world. This reorganization has been particularly pronounced by the failure of the moderate Islamist model offered by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia. Meanwhile, the Turkish Islamist model has turned semi-totalitarian and the Syrian variant has devolved into a political and humanitarian disaster. Because the alliance between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Movement for Change transformed into a political agreement, and the strategic pact between the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has virtually fallen apart, new political alignments are forming locally.

During the Arab Spring, the Kurdish Islamists maintained an obstinate ambition to call the uprisings an "Islamic Spring," albeit through an opaque political discourse mired in equivocation. No Islamic party had specifically used that term, but certain gestures and actions among them indicated support for this view. Indeed, as the impact of the Egyptian uprising against Hosni Mubarak loomed large in Kurdistan, protestors in Sulaymaniyah renamed the historical Saray Square "Freedom Square." Though the sit-in brought both the secularists and Islamists together, this political imitation of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in a city long known for its secular activism led Kurdish

intellectuals and activists to abandon the demonstrations.

During a meeting with youth members of his party, Bahaeddin announced at the end of January 2012 that what was taking place in the Arab world was an Islamic spring in every sense of the term. This claim matched the implicit stance of the KIG, which echoed the Brotherhood's initial position on the Arab Spring. Meanwhile, the KIM's policy oscillated between support for the government and the opposition.

The Movement for Change provided the backdrop for the Islamists' participation in the spring 2011 protests against the KRG. However, the opposition coalition that had brought Islamists together between 2009 and 2013 never transformed from an everyday political movement into a cohesive political strategy aimed at reforming the political system. Rather, the coalition continued aimlessly wavering between politics and ideological goals. Subsequently, each party returned to its ideological origins, with the Islamists going back to their Islamic political goals and the Movement for Change members returning to their secular agenda, which they shared with the PUK.

One of the problems that the Islamist coalition with the Movement for Change and, later, the PUK faced in its efforts to set up a parliamentary constitution and change the law for electing the president was the belief that political freedom and the democratic transfer of power guaranteed their place in the public sphere and political representation for the opposition. Meanwhile, the coalition forgot entirely about public freedoms, such as freedom of expression and women's rights. This produced tension among Islamists with regards to their support for increased freedoms on the one hand and their fierce debates with intellectuals on the other. For example, the Islamists showed up to Saray Square as an opposition force demanding freedom, but this did not lessen their hostility toward social freedoms and the right to freedom of expression. To be sure, they have come out against writers, journalists, and intellectuals, pushing local authorities to ban literature in markets under the pretext that it threatens public morality and insults the divine. This has caused a number of academics, writers, and activists to keep their distance altogether from the so-called Kurdish Spring.

These protests generated much discussion about the identity of religious parties in Kurdistan, all of which are Sunni Islamist parties established separately and that differ from one another with regards to tactical matters, ranging from jihad to government participation. KIM, which was established in 1987 by Mullah Abdul Aziz and occupies one parliamentary seat, was influenced by the Afghan Islamist model and adopted the practice of *takfir* in all of its civil conduct.

In 1998, a temporary front brought together KIM and the Nahda Movement, both of which emerged out of the Muslim Brotherhood school of thought, to form the Unity Movement. This movement, however, dissolved by December 2001 with the establishment of Ansar al-Islam. Ansar al-Islam was one of the radical groups that split off from KIM and became a target of the American army during its 2003 occupation of Iraq. The group has committed crimes similar to those of ISIS, including the massacre of some twenty supporters of the PUK in the village of Khili Hama in September 2001.

In July 2001, the formation of Jund al-Islam was announced. And on the first day of that month, the group issued a statement accusing the secular Kurdish parties of being infidels and foreign actors.

All of these transformations, in addition to the fissures formed by Kurdish national parties, served as successive shocks to KIM, but it was dealt the largest blow when one of its leaders, Ali Bapir, decided to split from the group in 2001 and announce the formation of the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG). Roughly 80 percent of KIM's political and military officials left with the young leader, weakening the movement from that point on and rendering it the weakest Islamist party in Kurdistan.

The KIG headed by Bapir is an extension of KIM, but it does possess local Kurdish features and occupies five seats in parliament. The political and ideological structure of the group is based upon a Kurdish identity rooted in Islam and

does not hesitate to express its hostility toward any secular features of the political system.

It is worth mentioning that the different Kurdish Islamic movements agreed on how the political system should look, but their private inclination to apply sharia law, as well as their partnership within political and legislative institutions, prevented them from attracting young people. When we look at the significant number of young Kurdish people who joined ISIS we will discover that both the Kurdish Islamic and the nationalist parties failed to confront ISIS ideologically.

As a branch of the Kurdish Muslim Brotherhood, the KIU, which was established in 1994, differs slightly from the remainder of the Islamic political parties with regard to its vision and its view on sharia rule. Unlike KIM which was created in Iran, KIU was created in Iraqi Kurdistan and did not have a military wing. However, KIU leans less toward political clarity and more toward underground politics. Before its establishment, the party was an organization named Islamic Relief and successfully established a social, cultural, and psychological incubator before it revealed itself to be a political party. It achieved this through charity work and distributing daily necessities, such as food, clothing, healthcare, education, and money to those in need. Through these "soft" policies the KIU was able to foster a new generation raised on its ideological and intellectual programs in the late 1990s and first decade of the 2000s. Moreover, the group successfully brought its officials -- particularly the women among them -- from the fields of medicine, education, engineering, media, and modern sciences into the majority of institutions in Kurdistan. In this way, the Kurdish Muslim Brotherhood's policies are not unlike those of its regional and international counterparts and similarly possess a flexible civic character.

Through proper cooperation, Islamist leaders may be able to unify the Kurdistan Islamic Union, the Kurdish Islamic Group, and the Kurdish Islamic Movement. An honest and clear stance remains to be taken on the religious interpretations adopted by ISIS, particularly concerning imprisoning and enslaving Yazidis as well as imposing a tax on Christians in Syria and Iraq. This is a pressing demand that must be addressed both now and in the future. It is worth mentioning that some of the KRG's Islamic parties perceived ISIS as non-Islamic, while others considered the group to be merely improperly Islamic. In this context, let us not forget the policies of Washington and the European Union, as it is impossible to imagine the Middle East region without them. Both power centers view the protection of religious and ethnic minorities, as well as their incorporation into government systems and political life, to be a component of good governance and the successful implementation of universal values. Moreover, these policies will prevent more atrocities from occurring, like those that befell Yazidis and Christians in 2014.

In order for the abovementioned political parties to participate in political life, and in elected institutions like parliament and the government, they must take a clear stance on freedom of expression and intellectual, literary, and artistic creativity, not to mention women and religious minorities' freedoms and rights. ❖

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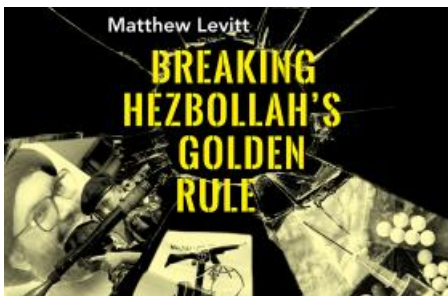
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