

The Upsurge of Islamic Fundamentalism in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s

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Abstract

In this paper, I will begin with an overview of the situation in the Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s and early 2000s. Then, I will discuss the emergence of the Islamic political groups in the area, which became distant second political force in the area following the main Kurdish nationalist parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iraq (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The emergence of a new faction within the Islamic groups and mainly the rise of Islamic fundamentalist group, which manifested itself in Jund al-Islam (The Soldiers of Islam) group, would be the core of my paper. I will explain the external factors that aided the emergence of such organization. Moreover, the role and the connection of Jund al-Islam with Al-Qaeda organization and the Arab-Afghanis within it will be stressed. Finally, I will explain the structure of Jund al-Islam, its bylaw, and its vision of an Islamic state.

Keywords: The Kurdish Problem, Kurdistan, Islam, Islamic Fundamentalism, The Middle East, Iraq, Nationalism, Secularism

Introduction

The activities of Islamic fundamentalist groups in the Iraqi Kurdish region were getting a lot of attention in 1990s and later on. The focus of the Western media, and particularly the U.S. media, was on finding connections between Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam), the most active Islamic fundamentalist group in Iraq and al-Qaeda organization. Before explaining Ansar al-Islam group, however, I will bring up the rise of political Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan region and specifically the emergence of such extreme organizations in the Kurdish society. The Kurds belong to an ethnic group inhabiting many parts of the Middle East, such as Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and some parts of the former Soviet Union republics. In Iraq, they are the second largest ethnic group after the Arabs. After the 1991 Gulf War, the Kurds, backed by the no-fly zone monitored by the American and British jets, were able to administer their autonomous region outside of the Iraqi regime control.

At the beginning, one Kurdish administration was established by cooperation between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Because of the struggle for power and external intervention, the administration was split into two regions: the eastern part under PUK control and the central and western parts under KDP control. The center of the first administration was in Sulaymaniyah city and the second was in Erbil city. Actually, there were two local governments headed by two prime ministers. The Kurds in Iraq represent an estimated 15-20 percent of the Iraqi population. They are the dominant group in the north of Iraq. With the Kurds live some minority groups, like the Turkomans and the Chaldo-Assyrians. The latter are Christians.

1. Political Islam in the Iraqi Kurdistan

Political Islam in Kurdistan of Iraq is a relatively new phenomenon. It started in the beginning of the 1980s. Previously, many Kurdish clergymen took part in or supported the Kurdish nationalist movement and other political movements. Some of them even led the Kurdish struggle for national rights in Iraq, not under religious slogans, but under the Kurdish political agenda.

The clear emergence of the Political Islam was after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988. The Islamic Movement in the Iraqi-Kurdistan was established with ties to Iran. This movement attracted little support compared to the nationalist and secular political groups in the region (Mahmoud, 2000).

When most of Iraqi Kurdistan became outside of the Iraqi regime control after the March 1991 uprising, there was quite enough political freedom to be practiced by people in the region. The Islamic Movement in the Iraqi Kurdistan was one of the first religious groups to be established in the region. It adapted al-Jihad (holy war) “to save the country from infidel and atheist forces” and to have a rule based on Quran and the Islamic sharia. The slogan of the movement was “Quran, rifle, the banner and there is no God but God and Muhammad is His Messenger” (Mahmoud, 2000). This movement trusted that the Kurdish people are part of the Islamic nation and stressed the importance of cooperation and support for the struggling Islamic movements in Afghanistan, Palestine, Bosnia, Algeria and other Islamic countries. It claimed the belief in freedom of opinion, in a condition that it does not contradict with the principles of the Islamic sharia (Ibid).

The Islamic Union in Iraqi Kurdistan is another Islamic organization that was established after the 1991 uprising, particularly emerging in June 1994. The Islamic Union considers itself as an extension of the Islamic Brotherhood Movement that was established in Iraq in the 1950s. This group is more active in the cities and more popular than the first group (Mahmoud, 2000). It differs from the first group in its assertion that it is a political reform group that tries to solve people’s problems depending on an Islamic view. Despite some differences between the two groups, in the 1996 Kurdish parliamentary election they ran in one united front, but they ran separately in the municipal election of 2000 in areas under PUK control. Representatives of these two groups had administrative positions in both the Sulaymaniyah and the Erbil regional governments.

In addition to those two relatively large organizations, there were other Islamic groups in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, such as the Kurdish Revolutionary Party of God, a small organization supported by Iran led by Adham Barzani, Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam), and the Kurdish Islamic Group (KIG). Jund al-Islam had changed its name later to Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam). All of these Islamic groups together have risen in importance to such a degree that they are superseded only by the two main Kurdish political parties, the KDP and PUK.

Jund al-Islam was created from four organizations: Soran Force, al-Jihad Movement, Hamas Movement and the al-Tawheed Movement. It had about 1000 fighters distributed to four battalions. These organizations were working within the Islamic Union Movement in Kurdistan, led by Mullah Ali Abdul Aziz (Risalat Al-Ilaqat, 2001). According to its bylaws, Jund al-Islam was called with such name because such word was used by Prophet Muhammad. The stated aim of the group was jihad claiming to protect the religion of Islam and Muslims and to confront the secular forces that “are trying to control Muslims in Kurdistan and to implement a Jewish conspiracy with the infidels” (Ibid).

Ansar al-Islam is an offshoot of Jund al-Islam, and it took its present name in December 2001. It was formed primarily of Kurds, but also had Arab elements. Since September 2001, this group had been engaged in fighting with the PUK (Radio Free Europe, October 2002). Ansar al-Islam was split to Jund al-Muntaqim (Soldiers of Avenge) led by Mullah Abu al-Zubair (more extreme) and had attracted many Arabs who escaped Afghanistan. The less extreme group, which kept the same name (Ansar al-Islam), was led by Sheikh Abdullah al-Shafil (Al-Sadoun, 2002).

2. The Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Reasons

The causes of the rise of Ansar al-Islam organization can be attributed to many factors, some of which are internal and others that were the result of external support or circumstances. Some of the factors are the following:

1. The failure of two main nationalist groups in the Kurdistan region (the KDP and the PUK) to implement their stated political programs, and the abuse of democracy and freedom by these two ruling parties. More important was the inherent political instability fueled by continuous fighting and struggle for power and domination between these two nationalistic parties.

2. Instability in the Kurdish region due to the former Iraqi Baath Party regime policy of destabilizing the region and aiding some Kurdish forces to fight others, or training terrorists and having connections with them to destroy the Kurdish administration and cut its relations with international community. It was reported that the Iraqi regime funded Ansar al-Islam through Iraq's secret intelligence. The Iraqi National Congress had published a report of a meeting between the Iraqi Mukhabart (intelligence) and officials of Ansar al-Islam, which \$7 million were given to the group to carry out assassinations and bombing in the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah provinces (*Al-Mutamar, 2002*).
3. The weakness of secular, democratic, and leftist organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Iraqi Communist Party and its heir the Kurdistan Communist Party-Iraq, that was considered to be the second political group after Kurdish Nationalist Movement, lost much of its appeal due in large part to the collapse of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. The intervention of both main nationalist parties in political and social life, and political discrimination and domination left other political organizations with little support. The Islamic groups benefited from the weakness of secular parties to spread their message and to have a suitable atmosphere in which to grow.
4. The economic motivation of some Kurds to join such movements. This was due to economic difficulties in the region and the international sanctions imposed on Iraq after the Gulf War. Many of these parties used to pay for those who joined their ranks. Many head of households received pay for becoming fighters for their political parties, especially if they were attracted to some of their ideas or when such parties were strong in their areas. Besides, religious ideas were appealing to people especially at times of crisis. Religious ideas hold strength in predominantly agricultural societies such that of Iraqi Kurdistan.

In addition to these internal factors, there were external factors that were contributing to the emergence of Islamic fundamentalist movements in Iraqi Kurdistan. There were ideological and materialistic support to Islamic groups from both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran has strived to support Islamic movements since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Saudi Arabia supported many Islamic groups worldwide expecting also to spread its Wahhabi type of Islam (Rubin, 2001).

3. Connection with al-Qaeda

There were links between Ansar al-Islam and al-Qaeda organization. One leader of Jund al-Islam was Abdullah al-Shafii. He was identified as an Afghani Arab, possibly of Egyptian or Syrian origin (*Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, 2001*). Another leader, Mullah Krekar (real name is Najm al-Din Farah Ahmed) is also strongly linked to Afghanistan. He studied Islamic law in Pakistan under Osama bin Laden (Radio Free Europe, September 20, 2002). Jund al-Islam members were trained in bin Laden's military camps and ran away from Afghanistan and reached Iraqi Kurdistan. When Jund al-Islam was formed, it was reported that a grant of \$300,000 was given to the group by a representative of bin Laden (Rubin, 2001).

The Kurdistan *Nawa* newspaper in Iraqi Kurdistan reported that Mullah Krekar had admitted his relations with Osama bin Laden (*Arabic News, 2002*). Also, the *Iraqi Kurdistan Dispatch*, a weekly news bulletin, reported on February 21, 2002 contacts between Jund al-Islam and Iraqi government authorities. It also reported that some Jund al-Islam prisoners spoke of contact among Ansar al-Islam, al-Qaeda, and aides to then the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (*Christian Science Monitor, 2002*).

According to U.S. officials, it was reported that a handful of second-tier al-Qaeda members had taken refuge in northern Iraq in an area controlled by the militant Kurdish group Ansar al-Islam (CNN, 2002; Radio Free Europe, September 13, 2002).

Some Afghani Arabs were killed in fighting in Iraqi Kurdistan. It was described that they were sent by bin Laden to launch the terrorist network Jund al-Islam and to start a military campaign to impose the medieval Wahhabi Islamic rule in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (PUK.org, 2001). The leader of the KDP, Masoud Barzani, was quoted as saying that U.S. officials informed him that they had arrested four al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan, who had admitted an Ansar al-Islam connection with al-Qaeda (Abu Dhabi TV, 2002).

4. Ansar al-Islam Activities

On April 2, 2002, Ansar al-Islam attempted to kill then the PUK Prime Minister Barham Salih in Sulaymaniyah and in February 2001, the group assassinated Franso Hariri, a Christian who was a KDP majority leader of the Iraqi Kurdistan region parliament. The group also targeted religious moderates. On July 15, 16 and 19, 2002, the group vandalized the tombs of Naqshbandi sheiks located close to the Iranian border. In March 2002, Ansar al-Islam destroyed two Kakai shrines. Kakai is a local Islamic sect influenced by pre-Islam practices (*Al-Mutamar*, 2002). The Taliban-style group killed women not wearing Islamic burqa (that covers the entire body and has grid over face to look through) and they designated bombs in some women public places, such as hair salons and other locations that are considered by them centers of moral decay. There were other reports of Ansar al-Islam site in northern Iraq where chemical and biological weapons experiments were conducted on farm animals (Burns, 2002). Barham Salih, premier of the PUK-controlled Kurdistan Regional Government held that the PUK intelligence has confirmed the existence of a facility experimenting with poison and chemical agents to be used in terrorist acts supervised by Ansar al-Islam (Radio Free Europe, September 13, 2002). This Islamic group had issued two statements declaring jihad (holy war) and threatened to physically liquidate secularists, to annihilate opponents, and to impose what it called “teaching of Islam with fire and steel” (The Iraqi Communist Party, 2001).

The group had imposed rules on its controlled areas. Among them were for women to wear the hijab (veil), women’s pictures may not be displayed at stores, in cars or at the market, music and songs were prohibited, and satellite TV programs were not allowed (Risalat al-Ilaqat, 2001).

Conclusion

The rise of Islamic fundamentalist groups in the Kurdistan region of Iraq was not confined to that area. It was part of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab and Islamic world, in reaction to modernity, socio-economic conditions, and weakness of democratic and progressive elements in the underdeveloped or developing societies. The emergence of fundamentalist Islamic groups in Iraqi Kurdistan was due to internal conditions, such as political and economic crises, weakness of modern and democratic forces, and the backwardness of elements in Kurdish society, coupled with the external influence and support from regimes and organizations in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and other countries. Because of the causes of the emergence of such groups, it would not be easy to eliminate the existence of their thoughts. A military solution to the problem would not be sufficient without educating, modernizing, and democratizing such societies in order for people in the region to be able to live in a society not controlled by fear or terror.

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