The Anti-Kurdish Thoughts of ISIS

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Abstract

This article explores the ideological motivations for ISIS's prejudice against the Kurds. From the group's inception, ISIS has rejected any kind of understanding of Islam but its own. However, its animosity toward Kurds has its own purpose and foundations, separate from its religious dogmas. The aim of this article is to study the reasons behind its fundamental aversion toward the Kurds. An analysis of the literature of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and particularly their interpretation of the Qurʾan and of Islamic prophetic traditions and history, demonstrates such a clear prejudice toward the Kurds, that no honest researcher can deny the vehemence of the group's hatred of the Kurds and their nationalist ideology. This animus explains, at least in part, why ISIS promulgated such a virulent anti-Kurdish ideology and recruited fighters to invade Kurdish lands. This study examines the ideological motives behind the group's behavior toward the Kurds. The article's hypothesis is that the Arab extremists that filled the ranks of ISIS, whether they came from secular nationalist, jihadist, or even moderate Islamist backgrounds, shared an antipathy against the Kurdish people that was deeply rooted in pro-Arab nationalistic sentiment. Below, the article looks at the deadly combination of Baʿthist ideology, which had previously led to genocidal campaigns against Kurds under Saddam Hussein, with the religious extremism of ISIS. A qualitative research method of discourse analysis is used to shed light on the ideological roots of ISIS's antagonism against Kurds. Kurdish-studies researchers will benefit from this study, as well as security, counter-terrorism, and Middle Eastern researchers and students.

Keywords: ISIS; Arab Nationalism; Kurds; ISIS Ideology; Wahhabism; Baʿthism

Historical Background of ISIS

As a result of a coincidence of political, cultural, and historical circumstances, ISIS surprised the world by quickly conquering territory the size of Great

Britain in the heart of Iraq and Syria,[1] taking advantage of state failures in both countries. Within its borders, it enjoyed a fairly self-sufficient economy and control of vast reserves of oil. In Iraq in particular, ISIS exploited the resentment of the country's Sunni minority toward the Shiʿi-dominated central government. In the Muslim world outside of Iraq, other Islamic movements pledged allegiance to the group, and ISIS acquired a stream of global funding in addition wide-ranging combat and terrorism experience. The group's existence is inconceivable without the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The following military occupation of Iraq marked a turning point in the history of jihadist movements, as it acted like a magnet to bring different jihadist groups together into one country, whereas they had previously been more isolated and scattered across various theaters of war in Chechnya, Algeria, and Afghanistan.[2]

At its maximum extent, ISIS dominion stretched from the border with Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan in the north, to Jordan and Saudi Arabia in the south, to the suburbs of Baghdad in the east, and to Damascus in the west.[3] Acting as a state while rejecting the validity of existing international borders, the Islamic State wanted to annex more territories and expand its area, aspiring ultimately to control of the entire Muslim world. Branches were formed in almost every region of the Islamic world. ISIS proudly presented a brutal self-image to the world. It sought to acquire chemical weapons, as well as the technical knowledge to manufacture them, and thus recruited dozens of Iraqis, Syrian, and Lebanese chemical experts.[4] ISIS introduced its own map of the areas it sought to control in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and some parts of Europe, labelling them with names used in previous Islamic empires.

ISIS, which began calling itself the Islamic State in order to better represent the global scope of its ambitions, deliberately engaged in excessive violence as a form of psychological warfare. Some analysts believe that ISIS had adopted Abu Bakr Naji's strategic theory "Management of Savagery" as a framework for its complex and sophisticated practice of psychological warfare.[5] On the ground, ISIS fought on all fronts: against the Kurds in the north, Iraqi armed forces in the east, and Syrian government forces and opposition factions in the west. Russia eventually entered the fray as well, using air raids to bombard ISIS positions in Syria [Figure 2].

Ideological Aspect

The ideological roots of ISIS can be traced back to the ideas of certain religious intellectuals, who considered the revival of Islam as the only solution for rescuing Muslim communities from a condition of chronic societal weakness.

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[1] Atwan, *The Islamic State: Roots, Savagery and Future* (Beirut: Al Saqqi, 2015).
[2] For further discussion regarding the growth of the Islamic movements in Iraq and Syria, see: Atwan, *State*, 13.
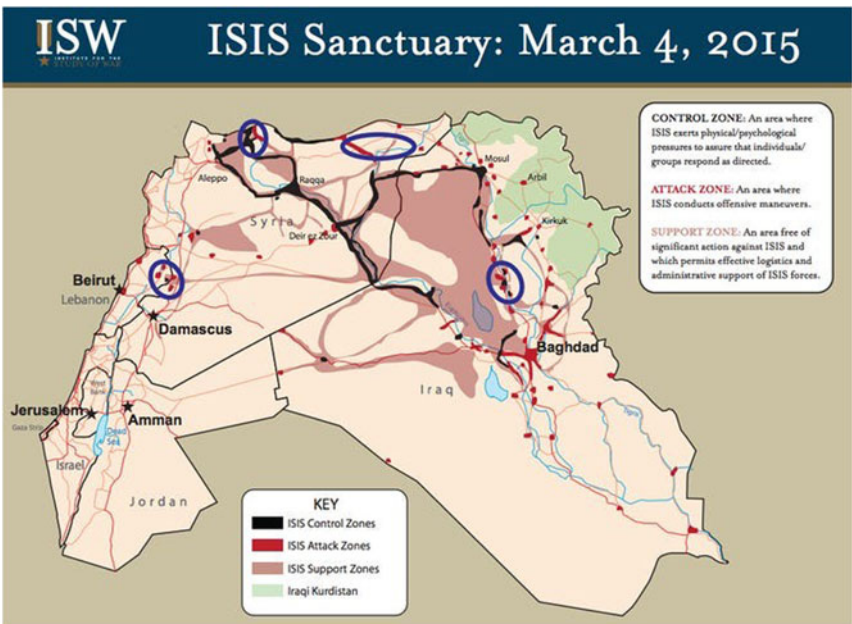[3] The Islamic State: Roots, Savagery and Futur. Beirut: Al Saqqi).
[4] Atwan, *The Islamic State*, 229–30.
[5] Ibid., 149.

Aitken 2015.

Figure 1. ISIS planned map of territorial control, named after previous Islamic empires.

McFate 2015.

Figure 2. The actual frontiers of ISIS against the Kurds, Iraqi armed forces, and the Syrian regime.

Specifically, they called for the revival of an Islamic Caliphate in accordance with what they perceived to be the political, social, and ethical standards established in the seventh century.[6]

The ISIS ideology also carries an undercurrent of fascism. In the course of Islamic history, there have been similar ideological irruptions under different names, outbursts of fervor that recognize neither temporal or physical limits nor the concept of holiness. Characteristically, such movements revolve solely around their leader (caliph) and his ideas and decisions. ISIS claims to embody the purest level of Islam, enacting a solution heralded by several Islamic parties and intellectuals as a panacea for the problems of the Muslim world. However, in actuality, they wage brutal wars, destroy mosques and the shrines of prophets, and rape and murder innocent people – a fatal strategy for the long term, even if it yields some brilliant tactical successes in the short term. Their slogan of "No God but Allah" demonstrates a core belief that they act as personal representatives of God, allowing them to assume a juridical power higher than that of any human authority. Consequently, atrocities, mass destruction, genocide, and extremism are natural consequences of their way of thinking.[7]

Further, the ideology of ISIS is directly linked to an offshoot of the Wahhabist understanding of Islam. Salafism, in the form put forward by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in Najd during the eighteenth century in present-day Saudi Arabia, was an extreme interpretation of Islam that covered all aspects of the religion, from creed to worship. They innovated a radical new theory of Islamic creed by attacking contemporary Muslim communities as dens of disbelievers or apostates and then by seeking to enforce the judgment of apostasy, by which the apostates must be killed. The group would later be called the Wahhabis, after its founder Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. A sect called the *Kharijtes* ("seceders") were the first to carry out the radical ideology promoted by Wahhabism.[8] Their first conflict was with the fourth Islamic Caliph 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet

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[6] Al-Athri (ISIS), *Iraq and Levant: According to the Sunna and Islam* (2015).

[7] Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS Where to: the Jihadist Beyond Al-Qaeda*, trans. M. Sheeya (Beirut: The Arabic Unity Research Centre, 2016).)

[8] The Kharijites (Arabic: *khawarij*; sing. *khariji*) were the first identifiable sect of Islam. Their identity emerged as followers of Muhammad attempted to determine the extent to which one could deviate from ideal norms of behavior and still be called Muslim. The extreme Kharijite position was that Muslims who commit grave sins effectively reject their religion, entering the ranks of apostates, and therefore deserve capital punishment. This position was considered excessively restrictive by the majority of Muslims, as well as by moderate Kharijites, who held that a professed Muslim could not be declared an unbeliever (*kafir*). The Kharijites believed it was forbidden to live among those who did not share their views, thus acquiring the name by which they are known in mainstream Islamic historiography – *khawarij* means "seceders" or "those who exit the community." Radical Kharijites, on the other hand, declared those who disagreed with their position to be apostates, and they launched periodic military attacks against mainstream Muslim centers until they ceased to be a military threat in the late eighth century CE. The Kharijites were also known as *Haruriyah* (from *Harura*, the site of one of one of their main camps in Iraq), and more generically as *ghulat* (extremists). Tamara Sonn and Adam Farrar, *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2009, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0047.xml.

Muhammad. According to Mansi, Sulaimn, the brother of Muhammad ibn al-Wahhab, accused his brother of being a practicer of the thought of Kharijites.[9]

Though Wahhabism was alien to the majority of the Muslim community, by the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, it had become a dominant Islamic trend. From their beginnings, the Wahhabis took their way of life with deadly seriousness and placed the utmost worth on practicing Islam; this led to their marginalization throughout Muslim societies, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabism is the official version of Islam supported by the government.[10] Nevertheless, the nature of the non-Saudi societies made them reluctant to accept such an extreme and uncompromising ideology in the name of Islam. Therefore, Wahhabism suffered from isolation within those Muslim societies, and the more liberal the society, the more it was isolated.

Wahhabi thought can quickly lead to violence. A group subscribing to Wahhabism can use that ideology to accuse a given community of being non-Muslim, and then use their ideology to justify the use of violence against them. Al Mansi wrote, "the Wahabism thought is the origin source of the modern Takfiris," which is the practice of calling other Muslims non-believers or apostates. "Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab himself practiced this ideology, that which is now adopted by terrorist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda, sometimes distributing his books among their followers."[11]

Following the discovery of vast oil reserves under the sands of Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism began to spread globally, financed by the revenues flowing from sales of oil. Toward the end of the century, with the help of 'Usama bin Laden, Wahhabism entered a more violent phase in Afghanistan, leading to Salafi Jihadism and eventually to Al-Qaeda. Attwan highlights "The development of bin Laden's and al Qaeda's ideology – perhaps best described as Salafi-jihadi."[12] Currently, the Saudi crown prince Mohammad bin Salman's agenda as embodied in the government's 2030 Vision plan for future development is working toward liberalizing the Kingdom and diminishing the traditional role of Wahhabism. Yet, beyond Al-Qaeda, Wahhabism is the main doctrine behind radicalization in Islam, and most, if not all jihadists, including ISIS, share ties to it.[13]

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[9] Aal Mansi, *Murajaat Al-Fikr Al-Wahabbi* [Revisions to the Thought of Wahabism], (2014).

[10] Sultan Alamer, "The Saudi "Founding Day" and the Death of Wahhabism", *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.* Feb. 23, 2022, https://agsiw.org/the-saudi-founding-day-and-the-death-of-wahhabism/

[11] Aal Mansi, *Murajaat Al-Fikr Al-Wahabbi.*

[12] Abdul Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of al Qaeda* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of Californian Press, 2006).

[13] Hassan Bin Farhan Al-Maliky, *Jizoor Da'esh: Qira'a Fee Turath Al-Wahhabiah wa Ulamma' Al-Saudiah* [Roots of ISIS: A Reading into Heritage of Wahabism and Saudi Scholars] (Beirut: Dar Almahaja, 2014).

Why Does ISIS Hate the Kurds?

Unfortunately, for non-Arab Muslims and non-Muslims alike, Islamic literature is rife with examples of hatred toward them. This is because Islamic history, prophetic tradition, and even Qurʾanic interpretations have been written after the dawn of Islam and long after the death of the prophet. Obviously, during those eras, many non-Arab ethnic groups had embraced Islam as a religion, while a pro-Arab ethnocentric sentiment grew among Muslim rulers, especially during the ʿUmayyad and the ʿAbbasid dynasties.

Though the growth of such ethno-nationalist sentiment was not in line with the religious precepts of Islam, and much historical evidence from the early Islamic period refutes such sentiment, it was nevertheless a political imperative at the time to promote Arab interests at the expense of non-Arab Muslims and/or non-Muslims. Consequently, this kind of racialism led to many catastrophes wrought by extreme Arab Muslims toward non-Arab Muslims and other non-Muslim communities in various historical contexts from the late antique to the modern and intensified under the reign of Saddam Hussein and his chauvinistic brand of Arab nationalism.

Though Muslim scholars agree on the humane principles of Islam, they seldom tolerate criticism of how the history of the Muslim community is documented by Muslim historians. Therefore, few Muslim intellectuals have the courage to speak out in criticism of the official historiography. Abdulrahman Sideeq, a Kurd, is one of the few who do. Sideeq, in a television program, remarked on this fact and refuted the official historical account that the Muslim community committed atrocities against the Jewish population of Medina.[14] He argues such narratives were fabricated, influenced by the Arab sentiment of later historians who wanted to recast the Muslim reaction to any kind of opposition by non-Arabs as being more forceful and violent than it really was, in order to legitimize genocidal campaigns, such as those committed by Saddam Hussein's regime and ISIS against the Kurds. To Sideeq, this will continue as long as such false historical narratives are not adequately refuted and disproven.[15]

The kind of narrative treatment of Islamic history that Sideeq attacks has nothing to do with Islam; rather, it has been exploited by extremist religious groups such as ISIS, as well as secular nationalists such as the Baʿth Party, to drive a wedge against non-Arab Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Sideeq states that the reason for this is that the historical record has been composed by Arab historians with a pro-Arab bias.[16] Sideeq further argues that such historians never recorded that Muslim troops had enslaved the non-Muslim Arab women of Mecca after defeating them in the battles of Badr, Uhud and *Khandaq* (or the battle of the "ditch").[17] Consequently, when the Muslims defeated the unbelievers and conquered Mecca, they pardoned all those

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[14] Abdulrahman Sideeq, *Anfal Between the Quran and History* (April 16, 2015).

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Names of the battles between the Arab Muslim community and the non-Muslim Arabs of Mecca in the early years of the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina.

non-Muslim Arab enemies. However, according to Sideeq, this was not the case with the Jews![18]

These interpretations of history have led to the misuse of Islamic history for contemporary political ends. For instance, Saddam Hussein attempted to inject historical poignancy into his war against Iran by calling it "Qadisiyyah," in reference to the historical battle of Qadisiyyah in 636 CE between the Muslim army and the Sassanian Empire, implying that he was representing the glory of Islamic history against the non-Muslim Persians. This historical framing further freed him to unleash all kinds of barbaric tactics against the Iranians. Similarly, when Hussein committed genocide against the Kurds, he named the military operations after a chapter of the Qurʾan called "Anfal," implying that the Kurds were not Muslims. Consequently, in addition to killing 182,000 Kurds in the Anfal operations,[19] his regime enslaved their women too.[20] Acts like this have the potential to continue repeating, whether those subjected to the hostility of extreme Arabism are Muslims like the Kurds, or non-Muslims such as the Yazidis.

Apostasy

A shared characteristic of Islamic extremists, from the non-violent Wahhabis to ISIS, is that they often try to find a way to attack the authenticity or legitimacy of other Muslims' faith in order to show that they, the extremists, are the one true followers of the path of Islam.[21] For example, when ISIS was ruling in Mosul, they changed the school curriculum. In our research for this study, we were able to obtain a PDF copy of an ISIS-provided textbook,[22] which is a credo written for year-one students for their first term. The book mainly relies on the Wahhabi doctrine and cites Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahab, the founder, in espousing crucial non-negotiable ideological points of view. The book states that "Shaikh al-Islam Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab said that there are a lot of tyrants, and their main categories are five."[23] The classification starts with the devil and ends with "those rulers who rule by secular Laws," whom are further subdivided into four categories: tribal chieftains who rule by customs and traditions; members of the infidel Parliaments;[24] members of legislative councils; and judges of the secular courts.[25]

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[18] Sideeq, *Anfal.*

[19] KRG Representation in the United States, *Anfal Campaign and Kurdish Genocide,* https://us.gov.krd/en/issues/anfal-campaign-and-kurdish-genocide/.

[20] JINHA, *Anfal Genocide and Those Left Behind: The Clearest Form of Genocide 1,* https://jinhaagency.com/en/actual/anfal-genocide-and-those-left-behind-the-clearest-form-of-genocide-1-7389.

[21] Al-Maliky, *Jizoor Daesh.*

[22] Al-Athri (ISIS), *Iraq and Levant.*

[23] Ibid., 35.

[24] ISIS considers all parliamentary systems an infidelity; to them the parliament and its members have no right to issue any kind of law, because for them the right of law-making belongs exclusively to Allah and the Prophet. Otherwise, if an issue is not legalized by the Qurʾan or the Prophetic tradition, then the only people who have the right of law-making are Muslim scholars. They define Muslim scholars as only those whose understanding of Islam mirrors their own Wahhabi ideology. Any other attempt at law-making is pure infidelity.

[25] Al-Athri (ISIS), *Iraq and Levant*, 35.

During the reign of the fourth caliph, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Kharijites introduced the practice of denying someone else's Islamic faith as being false and untrue. Later on, Muslim rulers encouraged scholars to generate a consensus on the concept of apostasy, which they deployed against anyone opposing their rule. Alalwani explains:

> The majority of Muslim scholars have closed the door to discussion of this question with the sword of "consensus." The claim to such a consensus was adopted long ago as a means of preventing the review of certain critical issues, such as this one, despite the existence of disagreement over the Islamic legal ruling on apostasy (*al-riddah*) during the first three centuries after the dawn of Islam. Yet despite this lack of consensus during the early days of Islam, those who maintain the existence of a legally prescribed death penalty for apostasy in Islamic law have claimed that such a consensus existed.[26]

All that any ruler or extremist contender to political power had to do in order to delegitimize their opponents, was to label them as apostates. According to ISIS, all modern political systems, such as democracy, socialism, and nationalism, are for infidels too.[27] Thus, to ISIS, any Muslim who is involved in any kind of modern politics, including any Islamic political parties participating in any of those political systems, is an apostate.[28]

In the view of ISIS, apostates, whether Sunni Muslim, Yazidi, nationalist, or Islamist, all equally deserve the same fate of beheading. However, the vicious enmity of ISIS toward the Kurds derives from many reasons beyond just radical Islamic doctrines. The next section explores how the composition of the personnel of ISIS itself combined with extreme Islamic ideology and extreme Arab nationalism to produce its signal anti-Kurdish sentiment. In particular, three factors played a major role in shaping ISIS ideology vis-à-vis Kurds: the prominence of former high-ranking Ba'th Party officials within ISIS, the influence of fundamentalist Islamic ideology, and the concept of global jihadism.

1. Ba'th Party Influence on ISIS

The Ba'thist Ideology formed a cornerstone of ISIS ideology, which exaggerated pro-Arab sentiment at the expense of other ethnic groups. When the Americans dismantled the Iraqi army shortly after the U.S. invasion in 2003, thousands of former army officers and soldiers were suddenly rendered unemployed and vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist groups, including the

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[26] Taha Jabir Alalwani, *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural Analysis*, (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2011), 7.

[27] Al-Athri (ISIS), *Iraq and Levant*, 37–46.

[28] This is similar to al-Qaeda's doctrine: "We believe that secularism, with all its different banners and types, such as nationalism, patriotism, communism, and Ba'thism is a clear blasphemy, contradictory to Islam, and makes its followers depart Islam," Abu Mariah Al-Qurshi, *Noor Al-Yaqeen: Elucidation of the Doctrine of Al-Qaeda Organisation in Mesopotamia* (Dar Al-Jabha).

forerunners of ISIS. Thompson states: "Instead of giving Iraq a fresh start with a new army, it helped create a vacuum that ISIS has filled."[29] Hence, many former senior Iraqi officers numbered among the leading members of ISIS. In his investigation of ISIS leadership, al-Shumarry identified ex-army colonel Haji Bakr as that the righthand man of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the caliph of ISIS. Bakr was also appointed head of the three-person ISIS military council and in 2012 he was promoted to minister of military industry; he also worked on plans for developing and manufacturing chemical weapons.[30] Abu Aiman Al-Iraqi, a lieutenant colonel in the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein, likewise became the senior-most ISIS official in Syria. He also served as one of the three members of the ISIS military council headed by his former Baʿth Party comrade Haji Bakr.[31] These ex-military officers of course came out of a military institution that engaged in war crimes against the Kurds of Iraq, including the chemical bombardment of Halabja in 1988 that resulted in more than 5,000 deaths and the "Anfal campaigns" that led to the deaths of 182,000 Kurds.

Saddam Hussein's "faith campaigns" further linked the pro-Arab Baʿath ideology to the intellectual framework of ISIS. From the 1990s until 2003, Saddam Hussein endeavored to revive Islam as a political force in Iraq, allowing Baʿathists to establish connections with religious extremists, including Al-Qaeda. In the wake of 2003, this made it easier for a Baʿathist to find himself ideologically aligned to a terrorist group such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS, especially when they shared a common enemy in the occupying force of U.S. troops and the new political actors dominating Iraq's political scene following the 2003 invasion, including the Kurds. Thus, one of ISIS's ideological roots is Baʿathism, and in particular the belief in Arab superiority.

2. Fundamentalist Ideological Influence

The second ideological pillar of ISIS is its fundamentalist ideology. ISIS attempted to establish a political system based strictly on its particular understanding of Islam, symbolized by the establishment of an Islamic caliphate through what it called jihad. This basic principle animated its concepts and procedures, and in particular its vision of establishing an Islamic state in Iraq and the Levant that would govern all Muslim communities. ISIS adopted terrorizing and violent tactics to impose their understanding of Islam on society. They also regarded their methods as the favored way to approach God. Their embrace of savagery is closely associated with the jihad that al-Zarqawi refers to, when acts of slaughter were committed under the guidance of two main antagonists, Abu ʿAbdulla Muhajir (also known as Abdul Rahman Ali) and Abu Bakr Naji.

Al-Zarqawi was deeply influenced by Muhajir and studied his book on blood, in which he states that anyone who surrenders to God's will shall never be like

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[29] Mark Thompson, "How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISIS," *Time*, May 28, 2015, https://time.com/3900753/isis-iraq-syria-army-united-states-military/.

[30] Khalid Bin Salih al-Shumarry, *Alabasirah*, June 7, 2016, https://alabasirah.com/node/391.

[31] Ibid.

a dead person.[32] Muhajir decrees that a country governed by secular law belongs to infidels and should be abandoned. He also suggests that infidels should be murdered if they do not provide a religious safe haven: supporting infidels and following their rule is a great blasphemy. Under Muhajir's interpretation, Islam does not differentiate between civilians and non-civilians. Both deserve to be beheaded, which is an act condoned by God and his messenger. Al-Zarqawi's other intellectual influence, Abu Bakr Naji, promoted a belief in jihad as the best way of guiding the Muslim community and saw terrorizing, expelling, and mutilating Christians and their atheist associates as a divine duty, similar to the mutilation and maiming of Banu Qurayzah during the early days of Islamic history. Some might think that ISIS is no more than a product of faith and religion, or merely the result of decades of dictatorial rule, thought, and behavior in various Islamic and Middle Eastern Arab countries.[33] Thus, under the radical, arguably un-Islamic ideology followed by ISIS, the Kurds deserve the same fate of extermination as any other infidel would. As a consequence, ISIS had no ethical qualms about publicly beheading Peshmerga prisoners of war.

3. Global Jihadism

The third ideological underpinning of ISIS is the legacy of global jihadism. When Bin Laden and Al-Dhawahiri articulated their vision of global jihadism, they called for "the enemies of Islam" to be attacked by any likeminded jihadist whenever the opportunity arose. In a similar statement, in an undated YouTube video clip, jihadist preacher Mullah Krekar stated[34]:

> No *fatwa* is necessarily needed for those who openly oppose Islam, and if a Muslim comes across him in a street, let's use an axe to behead him or fire a bullet through his brain. No need for a *fatwa*, don't worry about the

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[32] Hisham al-Hashimi, *The ISIS World: from the Establishment to Proclamation of the Caliphate* (London: Dar Al-Hikma, 2015).

[33] Fawaz, Gerges, *ISIS Where To: The Jihadist Beyond Al-Qaeda* (Beirut: the Arabic Unity Research Centre, 2016).

[34] Mullah Krekar is a Kurdish Sunni Islamist Islamic scholar who was the original leader of the terrorist organization Ansar al-Islam (Helpers of Islam). The armed group Ansar al-Islam had been set up in Kurdistan where it commenced its operations. Years ago Krekar arrived in Norway as a refugee from northern Iraq, though he has not been granted Norwegian citizenship because of his suspicious activities. He has himself acknowledged that he is the co-founder of Ansar al-Islam that targeted U.S. troops during the Iraq insurgency though he claimed that he had no knowledge of the terrorist attacks performed by the group. Ansar al-Islam has been linked to both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and has been implicated in bombings across Europe. Several members of the terrorist outfit have been hanged and many others sentenced to life imprisonment. Krekar himself has been on the UN terror list since 2006 and has been termed as a "danger to national security" by the Supreme Court of Norway. Authorities in the Kurdistan Regional Government have repeatedly asked for him to be extradited from Norway though the Norwegian government can't yet deport him due to humanitarian concerns that he might be tortured or executed there. The Famous People, https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/mullah-krekar-5991.php.

security forces. If it is possible for me to kill him, I will do it myself. Then let the authorities come and kill me too.[35]

This violent mentality of global jihadism can motivate non-ISIS members to conduct terror attacks as well – such as with the October 29, 2020, knife attack at a church in Nice, France – but it was especially effective when ISIS was controlling a large territory and claiming to have erected a caliphate.

ISIS installed its political system based on special Wahhabi "Najdi" *fatwas*,[36] particularly those related to law. Saudi Arabian mufti Mohammed ibn Ibrahim Aali al-Shaykh (*d.* 1969) labelled everyone who enacts or enforces secular law as non-believers. Many researchers believe that the state's intellectual reference is based on the doctrine of "Salafi jihad" inherited from Al-Qaeda, which is an attempt to reconcile the Salafi, the Hanbali, and Sayyid Qutb's thought along with Sirury. It produced a sum – Salafi jihad – that was distinct from its constituent parts. It was first put into practice during the period of the Afghan jihad. More generally, the *fatwa* of insurgents relies heavily on intellectual figures in the Islamic State and other Salafi-jihadist factions, and deploy jurisprudential texts such as Ibn Taymiyya's fatwa, called the Tatras *fatwa*, which legalizes fighting against Muslim rulers.

The concept of Tatras (literally, "human shield") holds that any Muslim who is used as a shield by infidels must be killed. This became a basis for justifying military operations against innocent Muslims.[37] According to this doctrine, fighting non-Muslims is an absolute necessity.[38] Al-Qaeda has relied on Salafi-jihadism as a basis for fighting against non-Muslims and launching military invasions. The doctrine of Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, the founder of the Tahrir (Liberation) Party, interprets the Prophet Muhammad's words and actions as concrete proof of the holiness of jihad against infidels and propagating Islam at all costs. Consequently, ISIS ideology was the outcome of a group of converging orientations, from which several influential political and social forces evolved.[39]

The Ideological Approach of ISIS Toward the Kurds

According to a controversial prophetic saying, differently interpreted by Islamic scholars, there would be a great and decisive battle between Muslims and an alliance of infidels near Aleppo, the second-largest city in Syria. Some experts believe the spot is situated somewhere between Rabia, on the Iraqi border with Syria, and the Aleppo region. The saying constitutes the

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[35] Mala Krekar, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFvN950sBBU.

[36] Referring to Najd in the heart of Arabia, where initially Saudi system combined with Wahhabism came to exist. For further details, see: Britannica, Wahhabi: Islamic Movement, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wahhabi.

[37] Nawaf al-Qadeemy, *Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed*, August 20, 2014. https://www.alaraby.co.uk/, consulted November 2022, now an inactive link.

[38] Abu Qatada, *The Caliph's Dress, the Thought Elite*, 7.

[39] Mu'taz al-Khatib, *Aljazeera Centre for Studies*, November 23, 2014, https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/files/isil/2014/11/201411235523312655.html.

essence of ISIS ideology. Abu Hurayra recorded that the Prophet Mohammed had said the Romans would arrive in Amaq or Dabiq[40] before doomsday and an army of the best people in the world from Medina would confront them. The Romans would attempt to fight against those Romans who converted to Islam and are called brethren by Muslims. A war would break out between the two armies and one-third of the Muslims would be martyred and another one-third would conquer Constantinople (Istanbul).[41]

The prediction forms the basic rudiments of ISIS ideology, and it impels them to make whatever military preparations they can. ISIS used the saying to draw a stark division: ISIS fighters and their enemy. According to ISIS military strategy, women of the enemy group are to be abducted and raped, to provoke the enemy into attacking ISIS in an attempt to free their women. The Muslims would then gather to defend the Muslim invaders, i.e., ISIS, and band together to defeat their enemy and conquer Constantinople. The battlefield would be Kurdistan, and, since many of the raped women were Yazidi Kurds, the war would take on an ideological aspect against the Kurds, turning it into a holy war that religiously necessitates their elimination.

As mentioned above, Saddam Hussein inflicted a similar genocide against the Kurds during the Anfal campaigns. The Baʿthist regime was not purely Islamic, and the Kurds were not apostates or non-believers in Islam. However, a justification for committing genocide against Kurds can always be found, whether the victims are Sunni Muslims or Yazidis. All too often, the global Muslim community, and particularly in the Arab world, meets ongoing violations of the human rights of Kurds with silence. Two major factors worked in favor of the Baʿthists in their genocidal policy toward the Kurds. First, many Sunnis saw the Baʿthist regime as a buffer against any expansionist aims of the Shiʿi government of Iran. Second, chauvinistic sentiment among Arabs fortified their silence. Even now, when the tension between Islamism and Kuridsh nationalism surfaces in the Arab world, the vast majority of Arabs keep silent. The muted reaction to recent offenses by ISIS against the Kurds in Iraq and Syria bears evidence of this view, as not one Arab state has condemned the Islamic State's actions against the Kurds.

Furthermore, ISIS believed the Kurds would sympathize with its own renegade state-building project, while considering the Kurds' efforts in this regard as a threat to their nascent Islamic State – a competing nationalist aspiration likewise considered unacceptable by Arab nationalists such as the Baʿthists.

Even with all their ideological differences, ISIS has opposed the Kurdish nationalist movement in much the same way as the Baʿthists did, committing similar crimes of murder, intimidation, and displacement as Saddam Hussein's regime during its rule over Kurdistan. This is despite the Kurdish movement's initiatives after 2003 to rebuild Iraq based on principles of democracy, federalism, human rights, and power-sharing. Beyond the Baʿthists and ISIS, other groups within Iraq look at the Kurds through the same lens of hostility.

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[40] For further details about *Dabiq*, see: BBC, October 29, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54729957.

[41] Foda, 2015, 155.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has played a leading role in reconciling the Kurdish political parties in Syria, which are either allied with or opposed to its central government. The Kurdistan Region has repeatedly persuaded the Kurds in Syria to remain impartial and stay away from the bitter sectarian conflicts in the Middle East. It has experienced political development in the past few years and the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) role in bringing the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to a peace agreement reinforced its own internal development process. The KRG was a party to the agreement, based on which PKK guerrillas agreed to leave Turkey and seek shelter in Iraqi Kurdistan. By attacking Kobani, a Kurdish majority city in northern Syria, ISIS collaterally targeted the peace process in Turkey. Abdulhakim Khasraw argues that a secure and stabilized Kurdistan would guarantee Kurdish impartiality in conflicts in Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, and any threat to the KRG would jeopardize stability in the region. Consequently, Western military aid to the Kurds is entirely justifiable to avoid undermining security in the region.[42]

The Political Aspect of ISIS Against the Kurds

The foregoing discussion shows that ISIS can be accurately characterized as a radical ethnonationalist movement with a genocidal orientation toward Kurds. It has declared outright hostility toward Kurdish movements seeking national liberation and considers all Kurdish lands as part of its supposed caliphate. Toward that end, it has established several special units for fighting against Kurdish forces, hoping to subjugate them and occupy their lands. Thus, ISIS seeks to eliminate the Kurds, who they see as a threat to its existence. In particular, its threat assessment regarding Kurds revolves around four factors: the efficacy of the Peshmerga as a military opponent; the willingness of Kurds to work with U.S.-led coalitions; popular support for the Peshmerga; and the unwillingness of Kurdish Islamists to support or cooperate with ISIS.

Peshmerga

ISIS abhors the Kurdish security forces, but most of all the Peshmerga. The obvious reason is that the Peshmerga, unlike the regular Iraqi armed forces, defended the Kurdistan Region, and went on to defend other Kurdish territories within disputed areas in Iraq. It also sent forces to Kobani to defend it against ISIS's offensive. Gunter describes the Peshmerga as follows:

> With the institutionalization of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq after 1992, the peshmargas increasingly became the more regularized militia of the KRG. The term has come to be used synonymously with "defense," as in "the ministry of Peshmerga affairs." Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the peshmergas have come

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[42] The Arabic Centre for Research and Political Studies, "From the Arab People Revolutions to Regional and International Competitions: the Arabic Region Between Rising ISIS and the New American Involvement" (2014), 14.

to be officially called the Kurdistan Army and financially supported by the Iraqi Ministry of Defense. Occasionally, they even helped the government in the civil war that wracked Iraq.[43]

International Coalition

The Kurds' resistance to ISIS and their willingness to fight alongside the U.S.-led international coalition have served as a direct provocation to ISIS, eliciting even further animosity. Furthermore, the Kurds have received assistance in weaponry and financial and logistical aid from countries including the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Australia, Italy, and Russia. Even Turkey has had no objection to the provision of such assistance to the Peshmerga. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told CNN that Ankara supported the idea of arming Kurdish Peshmerga in the Kurdistan Region,[44] and Turkey also agreed to let the Peshmerga cross its borders to fight ISIS in Kobani [Figure 3].

Being a Peshmerga is considered the greatest honor among Kurds. Former president of Iraqi Kurdistan Masʿud Barzani has often announced with pride that he is a Peshmerga, conveying the sense that it is at least as important and dignified as his office as president. For that reason, throughout various Kurdish uprisings and revolutions, civilian Kurds have supported the Peshmerga by quartering them in their houses and by joining the fight when called upon.[45] Many non-Kurdish volunteers, as well as other Kurds from the region and the Kurdish diaspora, have traveled to Iraq or Syria to join the fight as well. An unpublished TV program by a freelance Kurdish journalist in Britain entitled "Peshmergas from Britain" explores the situation of two British-Kurdish volunteers in the battle for Jalawla.

International support for the Peshmerga's fight against ISIS is strong in Europe and particularly in the United Kingdom, where, for instance, apart from logistical and military support, there is a bipartisan parliamentary group[46] on Kurdistan, which closely monitors the situation and reports back to parliament. In 2016, a cross-party team of British members of parliament met with Peshmerga forces near Mosul [Figure 4].[47]

The Kurdish Islamists

Thirdly, to the great disappointment of ISIS, Islamists in the Kurdistan Region have aligned themselves with the KRG and supported the Peshmerga in its fight against IS. It was a crucial moment when the Islamists denounced ISIS and questioned its religious claims in the name of Islam. This of course further fed ISIS's resentment against Kurds.

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[43] Michael Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2011, 2nd ed.), 250.

[44] *Ekurd*, Nov. 10, 2015, http://ekurd.net/turkey-supports-arming-peshmerga-2015-11-10.

[45] Popular support for the Peshmerga used to be called *Hezi Pshtgeeri Mili* (the Popular Support Forces).

[46] *APPG Kurdistan* (2016), http://www.appgkurdistan.org.uk/.

[47] Ibid.

Berman 2015.

Figure 3. Volunteer Peshmerga.

The Islamic Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK) is the most noteworthy Islamist political organization in the region. It began during Saddam Hussein's reign as dictator of Iraq. As Hussein's belligerence toward the Kurds intensified, the result was described by Leezenberg as:

The turning point, at least as far as the emerging Islamic Movement was concerned, seems to have [been] in 1987. In May of that year, it appears, mullah Othman called for a *jihad* or holy war against the Iraqi regime, in

Robinson 2015.

Figure 4. Boris Johnson on the frontline against ISIS alongside Peshmegra.

reaction to the destruction and chemical attacks on Kurdish villages in the region.[48]

Thus, from the beginning, Kurdish Islamists' political participation was on the side of their fellow Kurdish nationalists in opposing the Iraqi regime. Their defiance in standing up against the Iraqi regime was as necessary then as it is now with respect to ISIS and other permutations of violent Arab nationalism. Sami Shourush cited the third edition (1989) of the official publication of IMIK, *al-Nafeer* newspaper, in quoting the group as having stated the following:

> The Kurdish Muslim cadres were strengthened in their determination to form their own organization and to declare armed struggle against the regime of Saddam Hussein after the intensification of Iraqi policies against the Kurds, such as the chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians, especially against the town of Halabja, which had itself been an important centre of those Islamic cadres. These conditions led to the creation of the Islamic movement in Iraqi Kurdistan and the decision to focus on armed struggle.[49]

In the same document, IMIK declared its political objective was to rid Iraq and Kurdistan of Saddam Hussein's regime. Hence, the Kurds' motive to form a

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[48] Michiel Leezenberg, "Political Islam among the Kurds," in *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*, eds. F. Jabar and H. Dawod (London: Saqi, 2006), 219.

[49] Sami Shourush, "Islamist Fundamentalist Movements Among the Kurds," in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, ed. Faleh Jabar (London: Saqi Books, 2002).

political organization came as a reaction to a serious episode of ethnic cleansing by the Iraqi government against the Kurds. Also, the objective remained political – to overthrow an oppressive regime. Meanwhile, this political struggle was somewhat coordinated with other Kurdish nationalist organizations, such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).[50]

IMIK was led by a group of mainstream Shafiᶜi clerics, who collaborated with the Kurdish liberation movement. However, a small group of Afghan jihadists, who followed a doctrine of combative Salafism, including Mullah Krekar, returned to Kurdistan and also joined IMIK. This led to the formation of a group of extremists within IMIK, with ideological and political aims beyond the Kurdish liberation movement. They triggered ideological differences with other non-Islamist Kurdish organizations, namely the PUK, and many bloody battles broke out between them. Eventually, the radicals split off from the IMIK and started their own terrorist organization.[51]

The remaining terrorist groups among the Kurdish jihadists later joined ISIS. More recently, a new crop of jihadists has joined the terrorist group, among them a Salafi shaykh known as Mula Shwan, who has been labelled in Kurdish media as a notorious exponent of Kurdish terrorism. According to *Rudaw*, there are an estimated 500 Kurds terrorists within ISIS ranks.[52] Despite the proximity between ISIS-controlled territories and the Kurdistan Region, 500 is a relatively small figure compared to ISIS recruits from elsewhere. According to *Altagreer*, 3200 Tunisians have joined ISIS, 3000 Saudis, 1500 Moroccans, and 700 French nationals.

The relatively low number of Kurdish recruits to ISIS can be explained by a number of factors, according to (Mustafa: 2020). First, the nature of the Kurdish political context, which emphasizes the struggle for national rights and self-determination based on ethnos. Second, the Kurdistan Islamic Union's (KIU)[53] pioneering work as a non-violent civilian actor has served as a role model for young Kurdish Islamists, particularly the Islamic Group and IMIK.[54] In fact, the three Islamic political parties in Kurdistan Region participate in the struggle for political autonomy of Kurdistan, with the KIU and Islamic Group drawing the support of around 330,000 voters.[55] Furthermore, ISIS may have an interest in exaggerating the number of Kurds within its ranks for the sake of undermining international support for the KRG.

Thus, it is unlikely that the ideology of ISIS will grow among the Kurds. Instead, the Peshmerga has been held out as the legitimate defender of the Kurds, as well as other minority groups who find a safe haven in the

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[50] Ibid., 178–79.

[51] Mohammad Salih Mustafa, *Nationalism and Islamism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: The Emergence of the Kurdistan Islamic Union* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 58–59.

[52] *Rudaw Net*, February 9, 2015, http://rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/09022015.

[53] Mohammad Salih Mustafa, *Nationalism and Islamism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: The Emergence of the Kurdistan Islamic Union* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020),

[54] Ibid.

[55] NDI, *National Democratic Institute*, November 19, 2013, https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI-Iraq-Election-Watch-Ed7.pdf.

Kurdistan Region from the terror of ISIS. As for the Kurds' attitude toward terrorists, whoever is linked to ISIS terrorists is strongly denounced by all.

ISIS regards the Kurdish movements as followers of the Western powers in terms of their ideology and organization. This perhaps represents an extension of the Baʿthists' view of the Kurdish liberation movements as being puppets of Israel and Western colonial powers. Indeed, ISIS claims it is trying to abolish the borders drawn under the Sykes-Picot agreement on the grounds of advancing the interests of Sunni Arabs, and thus it considers any attempt to foil its plans as a plot supported by Western colonialism. ISIS has made similar accusations of collaborationism with imperialist powers against the Shiʿi, Christians, Yazidis, and other groups, who had themselves already been victims of the Sykes-Picot agreement. As a defender of specifically Sunni Arab interests, ISIS believes it necessary to exterminate a Kurdish presence in those territories carved by the Sykes-Picot agreement. However, the reality is that they have been responsible for harming Sunni Arabs in that area more than any other group, and when Sunni Arabs have had a chance to escape from ISIS control, they have sought refuge in the Kurdistan Region.

Compared to the regular Iraqi forces, ISIS has faced especially strong resistance from the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, first from those defending Iraqi Kurdistan and second by the Kurds who participated in the liberation of Iraqi Sunni areas from ISIS control. Arguably, Kurdish forces have been the terrorist group's biggest threat, forcing ISIS to open up continuous fronts and to assume a defensive posture. Kurdish resistance has further provoked the militant group to launch myriad attacks on Kurdish defense lines and use its media propaganda arms to inflame sentiment against Kurds. ISIS did briefly penetrate KRG borders, which challenged the Kurds to protect a 1,000-kilometer-long frontier. While the Peshmerga were trying to stop the advancement of ISIS on the ground, the United States announced its assistance to the Kurds in their fight against ISIS. Together, they succeeded in stopping ISIS from consolidating a regional entity from which they could build an empire. Even when ISIS announced the end of its holy war against the Kurds, it continued its attacks on the outskirts of Kirkuk, the Mosul Dam, and Sinjar. However, the overall question of future relations between Kurds and Sunni Arabs in Iraq remains unsettled, especially since the advent of ISIS has greatly complicated regional trends and strategies. It should be noted that the process of dismantling the organization of the Islamic State will not be easy and forms a crucial part of the complex Middle East geopolitical equation.

ISIS's Narrative of the Kurds

In addition to calling Kurds apostates and Western collaborators,[56] ISIS also exploited the existence of small factions of leftists among the Kurds to label the group as a whole as Marxists.[57] Obviously, this would justify ISIS in treating

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[56] ISIS also saw the Kurds as strong allies of the Syrian and Iraqi regimes, which they also deemed apostates. (ISIS, Al-Tawafan 2014a).

[57] *Dabiq*, "Al-Tawafan," 2: 2014a, 12–18.

the Kurds as they would any other non-Muslim group. Hence, according to ISIS, the Kurds must either accept its version of Islam or die, and the Islamic State did not hesitate in waging war against them.

ISIS's publications, in particular *Dabiq*, clearly evince its views on the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. For instance, ISIS states that after being informed of their status as apostates, a Kurdish group so accused would have a few days to repent. Repentance to ISIS means the acceptance of its interpretation and version of Islam. Otherwise, they would be executed. The group's use of the phrase "Kurdish communists" reveals the logic by which the Kurds' claim to Islamic faith is negated, rendering them as infidels who deserve to be murdered.[58] The statement below, published in *Dabiq*, claimed the following:

> The first conquest was that of the northwestern regions of Wilayat Ninawa (Sinjar, Zimmar, Rabi'ah, and Wanah). These areas were mostly occupied by the Peshmerga, who fled upon hearing of the Islamic State's approach. Some of these regions were inhabited by the devil-worshipping Yazidiyya. Alhamdulillah, hundreds of them turned to Allah, declared their Islam, and repented from their *kufr*. As for those who insisted upon their *shirk*,[59] then they fled with the Peshmerga apostates.[60]

The Yazidi Kurds, who are not Muslims, feel disrespected and even dehumanized when they hear that they are called devil-worshippers. Labelling them as such makes them an easy target for mass killings. To ISIS, the Yazidis who gave up their *kufr* (literally, "blasphemy") were forgiven and those who did not, "fled with Peshmerga apostates." Subsequently, the Yazidis who remained insistent on their faith faced the brutality of ISIS: the males were killed and female Yazidis were raped and sold as sex slaves.[61]

Another ISIS narrative is that the Kurds are purely secular and consider Israel as well as the "crusaders" to be an ally of any future Kurdish state.[62] This reflects an attempt to mobilize Muslim public opinion against the Kurds and their political parties, in particular the PKK. Furthermore, it depicts the Kurdish political parties as friends of Israel and the Western world. ISIS literature is chock full of such rhetoric. For instance, in issue 10 of *Dabiq*, ISIS states, "the bulk of the Kurdish political and military factions today are secularist or Marxist. The most prominent of these rival factions are the PKK, the KDP and the PUK." Again, expressing hope for discord between the main Kurdish political parties, another *Dabiq* article stated, "May Allah increase the animosity and violence between the apostates of the KDP, PUK, PKK, and Gorran"[63]

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[58] Ibid.
[59] *Shirk*: literally, in Arabic, "making a partner [of someone]"; in Islam, idolatry, polytheism, and the association of God with other deities, *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/shirk.
[60] *Dabiq*, "Al-Tawafan,"2: 2014a, 18.
[61] *Dabiq*, 4: 2014b, 41–42.
[62] Ibid.
[63] *Dabiq*, 10: 2015, 30–48.

Calling the Kurdish political parties secularist, Marxist, or apostate targets them for murder by extremist groups, including others than ISIS. Gunter summarized the following reasons why ISIS attacks the Kurds:

> In Syria, the Kurds occupy crucial territory that ISIS believes necessary for it to connect areas it already possesses and also to connect with the Turkish border and the outside world to facilitate movement such as oil sales and communications; 2. In Iraq, the Kurds have been historical enemies of the Baʿthists; 3. The Kurds supported the United States in its invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Sunni rule in 2003; 4. In June 2014 the Kurds quikly occupied the disputed territories around Kirkuk when ISIS pushed Baghdad out of the Mosul area; and 5. Finally, the Kurds may not be seen as good Muslims, given their support for the Yazidi Kurds, Christans, and other minorities.[64]

Conclusion

This study has shown that ISIS has taken advantage of every excuse to label the Kurds as non-believers, apostates, and Marxists. This vitriolic prejudgment follows from a few reasons: first, the way that Islamic history, prophetic traditions, and interpretation of the Qurʾan has been recorded by Wahhabi scholars; second, the influence of Arab nationalism over the thought and behavior of ISIS, especially via prominent ISIS military figures who shared backgrounds as high-ranking Iraqi army officers and carried with them into the new organization old scores against the Kurds; third, the existence of left-wing Kurds, which has emboldened ISIS to sweepingly characterize Kurds as non-Muslims; and fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the Peshmerga's bravery in fighting ISIS, especially alongside and within the international coalition, which provoked ISIS into fabricating conspiracies to demonize and delegitimize the Peshmerga and its base of popular support among Kurds.

The persistence of the Kurds in fighting for a Kurdish state and their vision of religious tolerance have subjected them to hostilities by governments and terrorist groups alike, including ISIS. Many of those hostilities are based on religious and anti-Kurdish chauvinism. The persistence of these anti-Kurdish thoughts and behaviors is a recipe for ongoing disaster for the Kurds, especially when they are injected with religious fervor. The hostile rhetoric and hatred against the Kurds are a combination of religious extremism and Arab nationalism that does not tolerate the existence of Kurds as an independent political entity. Thus, the Kurds in such circumstances would suffer under religious extremism as they have under ISIS in the same way that they suffered under the nationalism of the Baʿthist regime under Saddam Hussein.

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[64] Michael Gunter, *The Kurds: A Modern History* (New Jersey: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2016), 182–83.