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Rekindling the Flame: Zoroastrianism in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of Zoroastrianism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq since 2015 as a new religion inspired by Kurdish nationalism, feminism, ecologism and humanism. The author argues that the emergence of Zoroastrianism at this particular time is due to a combination of the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in 2014, legislative change and the importance some Kurdish nationalists historically attached to Zoroastrianism as the suggested original religion of the Kurds. The article outlines the historical context of Zoroastrianism in Kurdistan, and then explores the origins, beliefs and organisational structure of Kurdish Zoroastrianism. Also discussed are the legislative changes enabling the rise of the movement since 2015. This study draws on interviews with Kurdish Zoroastrian leaders as well as with representatives from the World Zoroastrian Organization, the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs and the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities.

Keywords: Zoroastrianism; Kurdish nationalism; Kurdish movements; religion; Iraq.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJI

Ji nû ve pêxistina agir: Baweriya Zerduştî li Kurdistana Iraqê

Ev gotar, li ser peydabûna Zerduştiyê li Herêma Kurdistanê ya Iraqê hûr dibe, ku ji 2015an vir ve wek dînekî nû yê ji netewegeriya kurd, femînîzm, ekolojîzm û humanîzmê îlham wergirtî tê dîtin. Nivîskar îddia dike ku peydabûna Zerduştiyê ya bi taybetî wê demê ji ber hejmareke sedeman e: di 2014an de peydabûn û xurtbûna Dewleta Îslamî li Iraqê û Levantê, guherîna qanûnî û girîngiya nêrîna hin netewegerên kurd ku ji aliyê dîrokî Zerduştiyê wek dînê resen ê kurdan dibînin. Gotar, çarçoveya dîrokî ya Zerduştiyê li Kurdistanê bi kurtî rave dike û paşê li kok, baweriyê û avahiya rêxistinî ya Zerduştiya kurdî dikole. Ji hêleke din, nîqaş dike ku guherînên hiqûqî ji 2015an vir ve rê li ber xurtbûna tevgerê vekiriye. Ev xebat xwe dispêre hevpeyvînên bi rêberên Zerduştiyên kurd re ligel hin şandeyên ji Rêxistina Zerduştiyan a Cîhanê, Wezareta Bexş û Karên Dînî ya Hikumeta Herêma Kurdistanê û Hevpeymaniya Kêmîneyên Iraqê.

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ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Geşandinewey agireke: Zerdeştêtî le Kurdistanî Êraqda

Em babete timaşay rewşî wediyarkewtinî Zerdeştêtî dekat le Kurdistanî Êraqda, le sall 2010da wek ayînêkî nwê debînrêt ke le netewegerîy kurdî, fêmênîzm, jîngeparêzî û mirovparêzî îlham werdegirêt. Nûser bangeşey ewe dekat ke derkewtinî Zerdeştêtî lem kateda ke Dewlletî Îslamî Da'îş le Şam û Êraq le 2013 ser helldeda û be yasa rêgey pê dedirêt, şitêkî giringe bo gerranewey kurd bo ayînî neteweyî xoy wek ewey ke hendêk kurdî neteweperist basî deken. Babeteke rîşey mêjûyî Zerdeştêtî le Kurdistan nîşan dedat, herwaş rîşey bawerr û binaẍey damezrawey Zerdeştêtî dedate ber roşnayî. Dîsan guftugoy gorranî yasa lew bareyewe bote hoyî derkewtinî em ayîne le 2015da. Em babete legell serok û bawerrdaranî Zerdeştîy le Kurdistan û damezrawey Zerdeştîyanî cîhanî û legell wezaretî karubarî ayînî le Ḧukumetî herêmî Kurdistan û damezrawey kemînekanî Êraqda çawpêkewtinî encam dawe.

ABSTRACT IN ZAZAKI

Newe ra geşkerdişê adirî: Kurdîstanê Îraqî de zerduştîye

Na meqale qayîtê zerduştîye kena ke sey bawerîya newîye serra 2015î ra nat Herêmê Kurdîstanî yê Îraqî de vejîyaye û hetê neteweperwerîya kurdan, femînîzm, dorûverperwerîye û merdimperwerîye ra îlham girewt. Nuştox musneno ke vejîyayîşê zerduştî yê ê demî çend sebeban ra qewimîya: hêzdarbîyayîşê DAÎŞ yê serra 2014î, vurîyayîşê qanûnî û tayê neteweperwerê kurdan ê ke tarîx de giranî daye zerduştîye ser ke aye sey dînê kurdan o eslî pêşnîyaz bikerê. Na meqale xulasaya kontekstê tarîxî yê zerduştîya Kurdîstanî dana û dima esl, bawerî û awanîya rêxistinan yê zerduştîya kurdan ser o cigêrayîş kena. Ser o kî vurîyayîşê qanûnî munaqeşe benê. Nê vurîyayîşî serra 2015î ra nat vejîyayîşê tevger kerd mumkîn. No cigêrayîş roportajanê bi serekanê kurdan ê zerduştîye û bi temsîlkaranê Rêxistina Zerduştîyan a Dinya, Wezaretê Ewqaf û Kar û Barê Dînî yê hukmatê Herêmê Kurdîstanî û Yewîya Eqalîyetanê Îraqî esas gêno.

Introduction

Zoroastrianism, or Mazdeism, once flourished in an area encompassing modern Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Zoroastrianism was adopted by successive rulers in the Iranian region and spread throughout the greater Iranian cultural sphere, with the religion reaching its zenith of influence during the Sassanid Empire (224-650 CE). The conquest of the Sassanid Empire by Arab invaders in the seventh century set in motion a slow but certain process of conversion to Islam. Adherents of the Zoroastrian faith are now but small minorities in the religion's Iranian homeland, with a dwindling community of Parsis in Northern India.[1] Small Iranian and Parsi diaspora communities can be found in various European countries, North America, Australia and New Zealand (Foltz, 2011: 73-74; Malandra, 2005; Rose, 2011: IV, 4-10, 38-47, V 1-7, VIII 1-3; Shahbazi, 2005).

[1] Members of the Zoroastrian community in India are called Parsis. There were Persian traders in India even before Sassanid times, but after the fall of the Sassanid Empire some Zoroastrian Persians emigrated to western India to escape persecution in their homeland. Over the centuries, the Parsis maintained their religious identity and established religious and social institutions in their new homeland. Recent demographic studies however point to a shrinking and aging Parsi population in India (Hinnels, 2008).

In light of Zoroastrianism's recession over the centuries, it is therefore surprising that in 2015 regional media started reporting on a growing Zoroastrian community in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (*Herêmî Kurdistanê,* KRI), attracting converts from among the local Kurdish Muslim population (Al Sumaria News, 2015; al-ʿAtābī, 2015; Rudaw, 2016a; Rudaw, 2016b; Salloum, 2016; Shafaq News, 2015). Edith Szanto (2016) described the movement as an invented tradition driven by Kurdish nationalism, disconnected from Zoroastrianism in Iran or elsewhere.

This article aims to examine the rise of Kurdish Zoroastrianism[2] in the KRI and answer the following main questions: How is Zoroastrianism in the KRI organised and how is it connected with Zoroastrianism worldwide? How does the rise of Kurdish Zoroastrianism fit in the religious history of the region? And why did Zoroastrianism appear as a living religion at this point in time?

To answer these questions, the author conducted interviews[3] with Awat Tayib[4] and Pir Luqman,[5] two Zoroastrian community leaders based in Slemani (Sulaymaniyah) in the KRI. To obtain a view of how the authorities in the KRI see the Zoroastrian movement, the author also interviewed Sheikh Ibrahim Mohamed Taher Barzanji[6], a Sunni scholar and Director of Guidance, Research and Studies at the Kurdistan Regional Government (*Hikûmetî Herêmî Kurdistan*, KRG) Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. To examine how Kurdish Zoroastrianism fits into Zoroastrianism worldwide, Shahin Bekhradnia[7], an Oxford post-graduate in anthropology and the World Zoroastrian Organization's (WZO) spokesperson for religious affairs was also interviewed. Finally, the author conducted interviews with Ido Baba Sheikh, an advisor with the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities (AIM),[8] and with Salah Ali,[9] an

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[2] The author opts to use "Kurdish Zoroastrianism" over "neo-Zoroastrianism" as used by Szanto (2016). The latter is too general and could be misunderstood as relating to any Zoroastrian convert, be it in the KRI or elsewhere. The peculiar connection between Kurdish nationalism and the Zoroastrian movement in the KRI, which is not found among Zoroastrians elsewhere, warrants a specific term to refer to Zoroastrians in the KRI.

[3] Unless otherwise stated, the translations of interview transcripts and correspondence are all author's own.

[4] The author conducted interviews with Awat Tayib on 27 May 2017, 10 June 2017 and 23 June 2018 at the Yasna office in Slemani. The interviews were conducted in Dutch and English. Additionally the author carried out complementary phone calls with Awat on 13 January and 25 May 2018 and met her during the Yalda celebration on 20 December 2018 and at a wedding celebration on 19 March 2019.

[5] The author interviewed Pir Luqman at the Zoroastrian Centre in Slemani on 26 August 2017 and 28 July 2018. The interviews were conducted in English.

[6] The author interviewed Sheikh Ibrahim on 11 November 2017 at the Amazon restaurant in Erbil. The interview was conducted in Arabic.

[7] The author interviewed Shahin Bekhradnia through WhatsApp on 2, 10 and 12 February 2018 and maintained contact through messages. The interviews were conducted in English.

[8] The author interviewed Ido Baba Sheikh on 22 February 2019 at his house in Erbil, the interview was conducted in English. AIM is an Iraqi civil society organisation consisting of members and organisations representing ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq, see http://www.aim-iq.net/en.

[9] The author interviewed Salah Ali on 8 September 2019 at Nali's restaurant in Slemani. The interview was conducted in English.

advisor with AIM on 8 September 2019. In addition to interviews, the author also attended Zoroastrian events in the KRI like the Yalda celebration organized by Yasna on 20 December 2018 at the Catholic University in Hewlêr, as well as the wedding celebration of a Zoroastrian-Muslim couple in Slemani on 19 March 2019.

The findings of these interviews were then analysed using the religious market model, a further development of Smithian economic theory holding as its main premise that churches compete for adherents in a similar way firms compete for customers.[10] Church membership is the "product" of the religious market, with the success or failure of churches depending on factors like competitiveness, the presence or absence of religious monopolies and state regulation of the religious market. Proponents of the religious market model furthermore postulate that monopoly religions are less efficient at competing for customers, and that a deregulated free market of religions increases the availability of religious products, increasing the level of religious participation as a whole (Iannaccone, 1991: 2-5; Iannaccone, Finke, & Stark, 1997: 462-464; Spickard, 2006: 6-7). While there are other sociological models examining changes in religious attendance or the rise and fall of religious movements,[11] the religious market model was chosen as it allows the study of the growth or decay of particular religions as movements within a landscape of other competing movements. Sociological narratives like secularisation offer insights into how religion in general interacts with society, while theories like religious individualisation and religious reorganisation can explain general changes in how people partake in religious movements and how these relgions adapt to a changing context. None of these can however help answer the question why Kurdish Zoroastrianism in particular arose in this place and time, or why it was Zoroastrianism and not Yezidism, Christianity or Buddhism.

Zoroastrianism and Kurdistan: A history

Zoroastrianism has a long history in the region commonly referred to as Kurdistan.[12] Remnants of a Zoroastrian past can still be found at archaeological sites like the rock cut tomb at Qiz Qapan[13] in Slemani governorate in Iraq. The earliest traces of Zoroastrianism in the region date back to the rule of the Median Empire, which conquered much of what is now north-western Iran and

[10] In this context, churches are to be understood as organised religious movements in general rather than Christian denominations only.
[11] For an overview of sociological narratives see Spickard (2006).
[12] For the purpose of this article Kurdistan refers to the geographical area in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey which at present have a majority Kurdish population.
[13] The exact dating of the tomb at Qiz Qapan is contested; some claim the tomb was constructed during the Achaemenid period, while others have postulated it to be from the Hellenic era (Haerinck, 1997: 33-34). On the tomb face a fire altar and a four-winged figure resembling the classic Zoroastrian *Faravahar* are depicted (site visit by the author on 6 August 2017).

northern Iraq in the seventh century BCE (Boyce, 2001: 48-50; Medvedskaya, 2006). After the overthrow of the Median Empire by the Achaemenid Persian king Cyrus II in the sixth century BCE, the western Zagros and northern Mesopotamia were incorporated in the growing Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE). Under Achaemenid patronage, Zoroastrianism flourished and was further institutionalised. While it is impossible to determine to what extent the population in the region followed Zoroastrianism, the Achaemenid era was the beginning of a series of Zoroastrian dynasties ruling the western Zagros and northern Mesopotamia, the areas inhabited by Kurds in modern times. The Macedonian conquest of the Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great in 330 BCE was a setback for Zoroastrianism, but the faith persisted under Macedonian and later Seleucid rule (312-63 BCE). It regained much of its authoritative influence when the Arsacids or Parthians conquered the bigger part of the ailing Seleucid Empire in the second century BCE, including the western Zagros and northern Mesopotamia. The Sassanid Empire, founded when Ardashir overthrew the last Arsacid ruler in 224 CE, adopted Zoroastrianism as its state religion, endowing the faith with prestige, authority and worldly possessions. The fall of the Sassanid Empire to the invading Arab Muslims in the seventh century CE ended Zoroastrian rule over the western Zagros and northern Mesopotamia. Zoroastrianism found itself suddenly stripped of state patronage and protection, which set in motion a slow but steady process of conversion to Islam. By the 19th century, the vast majority of Kurds were Muslim, with no significant Zoroastrian communities in Kurdistan (Boyce, 2001: 50-152; van Bruinessen, 1991: 1-3; Malandra, 2005).

Historical Kurdish Zoroastrians: Reality or imagination?

While there are thus indications of a historical Zoroastrian presence in parts of what is now known as Kurdistan, establishing if and to what extent the Kurds were Zoroastrians in the past is more ambiguous. Firstly, there is the difficulty of defining the Kurds as a people in history. With evidence of written Kurdish only appearing from the 16th century CE onwards, any identification of Kurds in pre-modern times based on linguistic criteria is speculative at best (Paul, 2008). The Kurds as a distinct people can be traced in texts of medieval Arabic authors like Al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Al-Athīr and others from the Islamic period onwards (James, 2007), but the evidence from earlier periods is more ambiguous. The search for a distinctive ethnic or cultural Kurdish identity in antiquity is made nigh impossible by the successive waves of Indo-European migration in the region; while scholars and Kurdish nationalists have suggested several hypothetical ancestors of the modern Kurds, none of these groups can unambiguously be identified as *the* ancestors of the modern Kurdish people, if the modern Kurdish people can be traced back to one ancestral origin at all (McDowall, 2004: 8-10). Even if the pre-modern historical lineage of the Kurds could be clearly determined, one cannot simply assume that the areas of modern

Kurdistan governed by Zoroastrian rulers in the past were fully Zoroastrian; the continuous existence of non-Zoroastrian communities[14] in the Achaemenid, Arsacid and Sassanid empires is well attested.

An alternative means of studying potential Zoroastrian traces in Kurdish history is by examining other religions currently followed by Kurds like Yarsanism (the followers of Yarsanism are also called Ahl-i Haqq or Kaka'i) and Yezidism. Martin van Bruinessen, for example, pointed out the similarity between the heptad of angels[15] or *haft serr*[16] in Yezidism, the *haft tan*[17] in Yarsanism and the *Amesha Spenta*[18] in Zoroastrianism (van Bruinessen, 1991: 9; van Bruinessen, 2017: 6). Citing the similarities between the cosmogonies of Yezidism and Yarsanism, which he sees as cognate with the Zoroastrian cosmogony, Kreyenbroek (2012b) suggested "a deeply rooted religious tradition of Iranian but non-Zoroastrian origin" in western Iran, informing both religions, while Asatrian and Arakelova (2004:235, 248-249, 264) assigned an Iranian origin to many saints and divine beings venerated in Yezidi folk traditions, and found similarities between some of them and members of the *Amesha Spenta*. Ido Baba Sheikh also mentioned the similarities in beliefs and religious dress between Yezidism and Zoroastrianism, saying that both faiths revere the sun and fire, wear white vestments during religious ceremonies and use ceremonial belts (Ido Baba Sheikh, personal communication, 22 February 2019).

As Yarsanism and Yezidism are highly syncretistic and display influences of many religious traditions, not in the least Islamic mysticism (Sufism), it is nevertheless difficult to clearly establish the temporality of a proposed Zoroastrian influence on their belief systems. Are these similarities a result of lingering Zoroastrian influence after the Islamic conquest of the area? Or did earlier Iranian traditions inform both Zoroastrianism and these two religions? A comprehensive review of these religions, their history and development and how they resemble and differ from Zoroastrianism throughout the ages would go far beyond the scope of this article; in the context of this research it therefore suffices to summarise that it is likely that religious concepts similar to

[14] For an overview of the Jewish communities that existed and often thrived in Mesopotamia under Achaemenid, Arsacid and Sassanid rule see for example Gafni (2002: 223-265). This example does not, however, mean that religious persecution never existed in these empires. Sassanid authorities were more than willing to suppress religions that threatened the stability of their rule as demonstrated by the persecution of Manicheism (Durkin-Meisterernst and Kreyenbroek, 2012) and the teachings of Mazdak (Malandra, 2005).

[15] V. Minorsky and M. Mokri on the other hand proposed a Biblical-Islamic origin for the heptad of angels, as cited in Arakelova (2004: 2).

[16] Yezidis believe in the *haft serr* (literally "seven mysteries"), a set of seven holy beings created by God who take care of the world and are periodically reincarnated (Allison, 2004).

[17] In Yarsanism the *haft tan* are the seven successive reincarnations of the godhead (Halm, 2011).

[18] The *Amesha Spenta* ("Holy Immortals") or *Yazata* (beings worthy of worship) are the collective of Ahura Mazda, the supreme God of Zoroastrianism, and six lesser, subordinate beneficent divine beings He created to assist Him (Boyce, 2001: 20-22).

Zoroastrian ideas were part of the religious landscape of modern Kurdistan in antiquity. There is nonetheless no indisputable evidence supporting the claim that the Kurds were Zoroastrians before the Islamic conquest.

Zoroastrianism and modern Kurdish nationalism

In the 1930s, the idea of Zoroastrianism as a source of Kurdish cultural identity gained limited popularity in Kurdish nationalist circles around the Syrian Kurdish nationalist magazine *Hawar*.[19] The Bedirxan brothers Celadet and Kamuran postulated the idea of Yezidism being the original religion of the Kurds in *Hawar* in the 1930s, simultaneously claiming that Yezidism was a version of Zoroastrianism.[20] This interest should be seen as an attempt to establish a religious aspect of a purely Kurdish identity linked to pre-Islamic civilisations, rather than an attempt at religious revival or a rejection of Islam on religious grounds. Several issues of *Hawar*, for example, commenced with a section of Qur'ān *tafsīr*.[21] This idea of Zoroastrianism as the original religion of the Kurds, however, never found much popularity beyond a small group of Kurdish nationalists, and Islam remained unchallenged as one of the bedrocks of Kurdish society (van Bruinessen, 1991: 1-3). Not much is known about the role of Zoroastrianism in nationalist thinking in the middle of the 20th century, but in the 1970s the idea of Zoroastrianism as the "original" religion of the Kurds seemingly resurfaced, notably with the founding of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) in Turkish Kurdistan in 1978.[22] The PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan referred to Zoroastrianism as the original religion of the Kurds (Öcalan, 2009: 15) while Mahir Welat, another party official, repeated the claim of Yezidism being the original Kurdish religion, conflating it with Zoroastrianism while visiting Armenia (Krikorian, 1998). Thus in the 20th century the idea of Zoroastrianism being the original religion of the Kurds gained some popularity among nationalist Kurds. This interest in Zoroastrianism was seemingly more an attempt to create a religious aspect of a Kurdish national myth, free from elements perceived as foreign like Arab Islam, rather than a true religious revival.

In the context of conflation between Zoroastrianism and Yezidism it is noteworthy that in the 1980s and 1990s an Iraqi Yezidi refugee living in Europe styling himself as Emir (prince) Muawwiyah Ben Esmā'il Yezidi, claimed to be

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[19] *Hawar* was a Kurdish nationalist magazine founded by Celadet Bedirxan and published in Kurmanji, French and Arabic in Damascus between 1932 and 1945 (van Bruinessen, 1991: 1; Galip, 2015: 252).

[20] "La religion yézidi constitue une déformation de la religion zoroastrienne, autre fois professée par tous les Kurdes" ("the Yezidi religion is a deformation of the Zoroastrian religion, which previously all Kurds followed"; Bedir-Xan, 1932: 7) – author's translation.

[21] *Tafsīr* is the interpretation of Qur'ānic verses. These were added from 1941 onwards, when the editors decided to change the tone of the publication in order to reach a wider audience (van Bruinessen, 1991: 1).

[22] It is not unlikely other Kurdish parties discussed the subject as well. This however goes beyond the scope of this article.

the leader of the Yezidi/Zoroastrian religion.[23] In February 1983, an *Association Zoroastrienne Kurde* (Kurdish Zoroastrian Association) was registered under his name in Paris, France. His son, prince Awar Bin Moawiya later was the chairman of a *Religionszentrum der Yeziden/Zarathustra* (Religious Centre of the Yezidis/Zoroaster) in Bonn, Germany, that was operational until at least late 1991. In that period, they contacted Shahin Bekhradnia, apparently trying to bring attention to the plight of the Yezidis by reaching out to Zoroastrians and propagating the idea that Yezidism and Zoroastrianism are one religion. In 1983 prince Muawwiyah published a book titled *To us Spoke Zarathustra*…, outlining his ideas (Shahin Bekhradnia, personal communication, 11-12 February, 2018).[24] In the early 1990s other similarly named associations operated in Germany in Bremen (*Yezidisch-Zarathustrische Gemeinschaft,* Yezidi-Zoroastrian Community), Emmerich (*Union der Zarathustrischen Yeziden in Emmerich und Umgebung und Wesel*, Union of the Zoroastrian Yezidis in the Emmerich area and Wesel), Celle (*Union der Zarathustrischen Yeziden in Celle und Umgebung*- Union of the Zoroastrian Yezidis in the Celle area) and Wesel (*Yezidische Zarathustra-Gemeinschaft in Wesel*, Yezidi-Zoroastrian community in Wesel) (Benninghaus, 2005: 4). The viewpoints and activities of these associations could not be traced by the author, but at least in their namesake they refer to a supposed union of Zoroastrianism and Yezidism. It is unknown whether these associations were related to the princes mentioned earlier. Whatever the fate of these associations, the idea of Zoroastrianism and Yezidism being one religion apparently gained some popularity among a group of Yezidis in exile in Europe in the 1980s and early 1990s, and was not only a phantom of Kurdish nationalists.

New Zoroastrianism in the KRI before 2015

Going a step further than the proponents of the previous nationalist discourse around Zoroastrianism, Kurdish individuals started identifying themselves as Zoroastrian from at least the 1990s. In the 2000s, these individuals began gathering in informal networks, with diaspora Kurds also becoming more interested in Zoroastrianism (Barber, 2019: 1). In the KRI, Zoroastrians remained underground for two decades until, in 2014, the first Zoroastrian library was opened in Slemani (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 27 May 2017). The emerging Zoroastrian movement in the KRI was headed by two Kurdish returnees, Pir Luqman and Awat Tayib, who had both become active Zoroastrians in the Kurdish diaspora in Europe: Pir Luqman lectured on

[23] After the death of the Yezidi prince Tahseen Beg in January 2019, a succession crisis erupted among the Yezidi community, which concluded on 27 July 2019 with the inauguration of Hazim Tahseen Beg, the son of the late prince. Prince Muawwiyah was one of the other contenders, and on 9 August 2019, he proclaimed himself prince of the Yezidi diaspora from his residence in Germany (Salloum, 2019). In his proclamation, Prince Muawwiyah stated he would follow the approach of his ancestors Prince Gul Bek, Ismail Bek and Muawwiyah Bek (Kani Press, 2019).

[24] Shahin Bekhradnia shared scans of several pages of this book with the author.

Zoroastrianism in the UK and completed a course to qualify as *Hirbad* in France, while Tayib was inducted as priest in a Kurdish Zoroastrian community in Sweden. The year 2014 also saw the rapid advances of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and in this context the Kurdish regional parliament started discussing a new law protecting the rights of religious minorities in the KRI (Salah Ali, personal communication, 8 September 2019), which would ultimately lead to the passing of Law no. 5 in 2015, through which Zoroastrianism in the KRI was formally recognised.[25]

Law no. 5 and the emergence of Zoroastrianism in the KRI

One of the assumptions of the religious market model is that government regulations play an important role in defining the religious landscape and enabling or preventing the rise of religious movements. This is true for the emergence of Zoroastrianism in the KRI. The catalyst was new legislation passed by the Kurdistan Parliament, the parliament of the KRI, which enabled the establishment of an official, organised Zoroastrian religion in the KRI. On 21 April 2015, the Kurdistan Regional parliament passed Law no. 5 of 2015, Law on the Protection of the Rights of Components in Iraqi Kurdistan (یاسای ژمارە (٥)ی ساڵی ٢٠١٥ یاسای پاراستنی مافی پێکهاتەکان لە کوردستان - عێراق). The components referred to in the law are ethnic and religious groups in the KRI; among the religious groups, the law explicitly includes the Zoroastrians.[26] Among other things, the law guarantees free expression of beliefs, free disclosure of religious identity and equal rights and opportunities for religious and ethnic groups, at the same time prohibiting discrimination and incitement of hate against these communities. The law also states that the components have the right to establish associations, and that cultural and educational organisations and places of worship connected to religious and ethnic groups have the right to be developed among their respective communities. Law No. 5 provided the legal basis for the establishment of Zoroastrian organisations and religious institutions in the KRI, and also allowed the creation of a Zoroastrian representation at the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (وەزارەتی ئەوقاف و کاروباری ئایینی) (Law no. 5 of the Year 2015). During an interview with the author, Sheikh Ibrahim Mohamed Taher Barzanji, a Sunni scholar and Director of Guidance, Research and Studies at the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs confirmed that the ministry views Zoroastrianism as a living religion in the KRI, conferring it the same status and

[25] Pir Luqman mentioned that he lobbied with the authorities on behalf of the Zoroastrian community before the law was passed (personal communication with Pir Luqman, 26 August 2017).

[26] By contrast, the Iraqi Constitution of 2005, which is also applicable in the KRI, only mentions Islam, Christians, Yezidis and Mandean Sabeans by name in the section guaranteeing the religious rights and freedom of belief and does not include the Zoroastrians or other groups such as the Baha'is (Constitution of the Republic of Iraq of 2005, section one, article 2, second paragraph).

rights as other religions (Sheikh Ibrahim Barzanji, personal communication, 11 November 2017).

Law no. 5 not only allowed the establishment of a Zoroastrian representation at the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, but was also the starting point of a publicly emerging Zoroastrian religion in the KRI. In contrast with the earlier interest in Zoroastrianism among some Kurdish nationalists, this Zoroastrian movement in the KRI also aims to revive Zoroastrianism as a living religion. According to the Kurdish Zoroastrian leaders interviewed for this study, Zoroastrianism witnessed a rapid growth of both its institutions as well as the number of people joining the faith since 2015 (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 27 May 2017 and Pir Luqman, personal communication, 26 August 2017). The development of Zoroastrian institutions is, so far, concentrated in the city of Slemani, the capital of the governorate with the same name in the east of the KRI, though there have been attempts at creating offshoots of the main Zoroastrian centres in Hewlêr. There are currently two main groups of Zoroastrians, both centred in Slemani. Pir Luqman indicated that the political climate in Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê*, PUK)-controlled Slemani is more permissive to the Zoroastrians, which is why his centre was founded there. Both groups have attempted to establish offshoots of their main centres in other cities in the KRI and Kirkuk governorate. There is no clarity about the number of Zoroastrians in the KRI; the Zoroastrian leaders interviewed during this research claimed thousands joined the faith, while a report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom mentioned an estimated number of 10,000 to 100,000 Kurdish Zoroastrians based on local media sources (Smith and Shadarevian, 2017). The wide variance between the estimates is an indication of the lack of reliable numbers in itself. As Zoroastrians cannot indicate their religion on their ID card application, there are also no official figures about the size of the community.[27]

One group of Zoroastrians is headed by Awat Hosamadin Tayib, the representative of the Zoroastrian community in the KRG at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. Barber (2019: 3-4) mentions that the selection of Tayib was backed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partîya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*, KDP), which chose to support her over alternative leaders. Awat Tayib is a Kurdish woman from Slemani, who emigrated to the Netherlands before returning to Slemani. This group is linked to a Kurdish Zoroastrian community in Sweden led by Andaz Hawezi, a Kurdish man from Koya/Koysinjaq in the KRI. On the 2 of February 2015, this group founded

[27] New national ID cards do not display the religion anymore, but people are still requested to fill in their religion in the ID card application form. The options are limited to Muslim, Christian, Sabean-Mandean, Yezidi and Jewish (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2018: 7).

Yasna,[28] an organisation dedicated to supporting the Zoroastrian community in the KRI and raising public awareness about Zoroastrianism. The organisation was founded as a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Slemani, and is registered at the Department of NGOs (DNGOs) of the KRG. The foundation of Yasna was supported by Kurdish and non-Kurdish Zoroastrian communities in the United States, Sweden, Australia and Canada. Among Yasna's activities is printing Zoroastrian religious and philosophical texts in Sorani, copies of which were handed to the author during two visits to Yasna's office (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 27 May and 10 June 2017).

More significant for the development of Zoroastrianism as a religion in the KRI was the opening of an official Zoroastrian temple by the same group in the Shorsh neighbourhood in Slemani on the 21 of September 2016. While the opening of the temple was attended by several KRG officials, the government does not provide financial or other support and the temple is self-funded by the Zoroastrian community.[29] The temple consists of a single hall in the same residential building as where Yasna has an office. The building is decorated with Zoroastrian motifs but is not a purpose-built Zoroastrian temple and is a rented property. There is no permanent sacred fire, a gas-lit fire is used for ceremonial practices. The temple is the location of important life-cycle events like births, marriages and funerals of the local Zoroastrian community, and also receives visitors from other places in the KRI and abroad. Awat Tayib, who is also the leading priest of the temple, indicated that the community is looking into purchasing land to construct a purpose-built temple and would also like to open a Zoroastrian educational centre. (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 27 May and 10 June 2017). The Yasna community also opened a Zoroastrian centre in the Ankawa neighbourhood in Hewlêr in May 2018 and supports a Zoroastrian *encuman* (council) in Kirkuk, which currently has no office or building to operate from. Awat Tayib stated that the main constraint limiting the expansion of Zoroastrian institutions in other cities is financial, indicating that the community lacks the funding to open more temples or centres (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 23 June 2018).

The Zoroastrian community in the Shorsh temple is currently served by two priests, including Awat Tayib herself. As there are no Zoroastrian centres of higher learning in the KRI, the community and the priests rely on Zoroastrian communities abroad for religious instruction. Awat was initiated as a priest by Andaz Hawezi, administrator and priest of a Kurdish Zoroastrian temple in Stockholm, Sweden. Awat then initiated the second priest named Kadrok. The

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[28] In a Zoroastrian context *Yasna* can refer both to the daily Yasna ceremony or the liturgical text read out during the ritual (Malandra, 2016).

[29] The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs has endowments funding Islamic, Christian and Yezidi clergy as well as the maintenance and construction of their religious sites. The other recognised religions, like Zoroastrianism, do not receive such funding (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2018: 6).

community is currently reaching out to Zoroastrian communities in Europe and the United States for guidance from religious experts, as these are not available locally. Yasna is also a member of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities, playing an active role in the organisation (Ido Baba Sheikh, personal communication, 22 February 2019).

Simultaneously with Yasna, another Zoroastrian centre, headed by Pir Karim Luqman, was founded in Slemani on the 8 February 2015.[30] Pir Luqman is a Kurdish returnee born in Slemani who returned from the United Kingdom and received a certificate of *Hirbad* from the WZO in Paris in 2017.[31] This centre has ties with Zoroastrians in the United Kingdom, and Pir Luqman himself lectured for nine years at an *atashkadah* in London.[32] The centre is housed in a rented residential building decorated with Zoroastrian symbols near Salim Street in Slemani; much like the temple linked to Yasna, this is not a purpose-built structure. Besides a hall for Zoroastrian ceremonies, the building also houses the offices of a number of NGOs linked to the centre, a small library with books on Zoroastrianism and a classroom where members of the community study the faith. Among the topics taught are Zoroastrian philosophy, the Avestan language and the *din dabiri* script.[33] The centre is self-funded by the community and does not receive government funding.[34] Pir Luqman describes himself as the leader of the Zoroastrian community in all of Kurdistan, but the centre itself is headed by Pirak Ashna, a Kurdish Zoroastrian priestess. Pir Luqman has published a Sorani Kurdish translation of the *Gatha*s, the hymns composed by Zoroaster and also other writings on Zoroastrianism in Sorani, copies of which were handed to the author. Pir Luqman studied Avestan in France (Pir Luqman, personal communication, 26 August 2017; site visit by the author).

The community linked to Pir Luqman opened a centre in Hewlêr (Erbil), the capital of the KRI, but this centre was closed down by the *Asayish*[35] and is not operational anymore. The *Asayish* did not provide a reason for closing the centre. Pir Luqman explained that the differences in the authorities' dealing with the Zoroastrians in Hewlêr and Slemani are political in origin. PUK, the ruling party in Slemani governorate, is seemingly more open to the Zoroastrian

[30] Pir is not a proper name, but a title for Zoroastrian clergy Luqman uses.
[31] *Hirbad* (alternatively spelled *hērbad*) is a title for Zoroastrian clergy. In modern times the title *hērbad* is considered the lowest priestly rank, below *mōbed* and *dastur* (Kreyenbroek, Hērbed, 2012).
[32] An *atashkadah* is a Zoroastrian temple with an ever-burning fire.
[33] The *din dabiri* alphabet was developed during the Sassanid era to render the Avestan language phonetically. The *Gatha*s and other early Zoroastrian texts of the Avestan corpus are in Avestan, and the Avestan language remains in use for liturgical purposes among modern Zoroastrians (Tafażżolī, 2011).
[34] Sheikh Ibrahim Mohammed Tahir Barzinji confirmed that the Zoroastrian communities receive no funding from the KRG (personal communication through email, 16 January 2018).
[35] The *Asayish* is the internal security force and intelligence agency of the KRG.

community than the KDP that rules Hewlêr and Dohuk governorates (Pir Luqman, personal communication, 28 July 2018).

Both Awat Tayib and Pir Luqman stressed that active Zoroastrian communities exist in other locations in the KRI and disputed regions like Kirkuk, even though most Zoroastrian institutions are centred in Slemani.[36] These communities frequently visit or reach out to the Zoroastrian centres in Slemani (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 27 May and 10 June 2017; Pir Luqman, personal communication, 26 August 2017). Ido Baba Sheikh confirmed that most of the Zoroastrians are based in Slemani or Kirkuk (Ido Baba Sheikh, personal communication, 22 February 2019).

It is noteworthy that the two Zoroastrian leaders have a seemingly tense relationship and see each other as rivals rather than allies. Pir Luqman claims leadership of the Zoroastrian community in all of Kurdistan, not only in the KRI, however, his status as *pir* is questioned by the community headed by Awat Tayib (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 3 September 2017). It is unclear to what extent the split in leadership is mirrored in the community, and whether Zoroastrians in the KRI align themselves with strictly one centre of religious leadership or freely move between the two.

Kurdish Zoroastrian beliefs

Between Kurdish nationalism and religious liberalism

With regard to religious beliefs, two central themes make Kurdish Zoroastrianism stand out from other Zoroastrian communities. Firstly, there is the Kurdish claim on Zoroaster, the founder of the religion. Secondly, there is the liberal, humanistic interpretation of Zoroastrian beliefs. Both groups in Slemani share these two beliefs. Underpinning the religious revival is the idea that Zoroastrianism is the original religion of the Kurds and the belief that Kurds should return to their ancestral faith. As discussed earlier in this article, there is indeed evidence for a long history of Zoroastrian rule in Kurdistan, but both Awat Tayib and Pir Luqman additionally stated that Zoroaster was a Kurd and lived in the area around Lake Urmia, in what is now north-western Iran. There is no scholarly consensus on where and when Zoroaster lived, and over the centuries many theories have been postulated, but most scholars point to eastern Iran or Central Asia as the most likely places of Zoroaster's origin (Malandra, 2005). Yet more contentious is the claim that Zoroaster was a Kurd; even the most recent dates postulated for Zoroaster's preaching place him centuries before any historical evidence that might be interpreted as referring

[36] The author met a family of Zoroastrians from Kirkuk at Pir Luqman's centre, which attests that at least some Zoroastrians are found in places outside of Slemani. The author also met one Iranian Kurdish Zoroastrian woman working at the centre.

to ancestors of the modern Kurdish people (Boyce, 2001: 18-19, 39-40, 46-47; Dandamayev, 1990; Malandra, 2005; McDowall, 2004: 8-9; Schmitt, 2011). More interesting than the flimsy historical veracity of these claims is how Kurdish Zoroastrianism goes far beyond the earlier nationalist claims that Kurds used to be Zoroastrians, reiterating that not only were the Kurds Zoroastrians, but that Zoroastrianism itself was in fact Kurdish. Additionally, Pir Luqman claimed that the Zoroastrian Sassanid Empire was not Persian but Kurdish (Pir Luqman, personal communication, 26 August 2017).

Besides the Kurdish nationalist aspect of Kurdish Zoroastrianism, both groups interpret the Zoroastrian faith in a liberal, humanistic way. Tayib and Luqman emphatically stressed the respect for science inherent to Zoroastrianism and the primacy of the wellbeing and welfare of people over religious rules. The Zoroastrian tenet of good thoughts, good words and good deeds is seemingly the only rule both leaders enforce. They also stated that secularism, respect for nature and the environment, gender equality and peaceful coexistence with other religions are core values of their belief system. Given the leading role of women in both communities, it can be said that at least regarding gender equality they put this principle into practice.[37] Both leaders were also eager to compare their beliefs with the perceived backwardness, misogyny, intolerance and violence of Islam, which they see as Arab and culturally alien to the Kurds (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 27 May and 10 June 2017 and Pir Luqman, personal communication, 26 August 2017 and 28 July 2018). The idea that Islamic law and political Islam bring social injustice and inequality is also shared by many Kurdish women rights' activitists (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011: 349, 351).

When asked how his beliefs differ from those of Parsi or Iranian communities, Pir Luqman explained that he does not believe in heaven and hell in the afterlife,[38] and that contrary to Parsi or Iranian groups he does accept the idea of evolution as postulated by Darwin.

Kurdish Zoroastrian clergy

One noteworthy point of difference between the two groups are the clerical ranks and how they perceive their own religious authority vis-a-vis Zoroastrianism worldwide. The titles for Zoroastrian clergy used by both

[37] In recent years Zoroastrian priestesses emerged among other Zoroastrian communities outside Kurdistan, but some conservative Zoroastrians frown upon the idea of female clergy (Bertoluzzi, 2015).

[38] A place in the afterlife where the righteous are rewarded and sinners are punished is a belief that goes back to the earliest Zoroastrian scripture. A survey conducted by Stausberg in 2006 and 2007 (Stausberg, 2009: 32-34) among Zoroastrian priests in western India found that four of the 42 respondents did not believe in heaven and hell, with nine others confirming their belief in heaven and hell but qualifying it by stating heaven and hell are phenomena of this world. The others affirmed their belief without doubt. Pir Luqman is therefore not completely alone with his rejection of heaven and hell.

communities differ from their Parsi and Iranian equivalents.[39] Pir Luqman's community uses four priestly grades, being: *pirak* (priest), *pir* (leader), *pir shalyar*[40] and *mazmogan*, with *pirak* being the lowest grade and *mazmogan* the highest. *Pirak* is the equivalent of *mōbed*; *pir* corresponds with *dastur*. The two highest ranks have no equivalent with titles in other communities; Pir Luqman himself has the rank of *pir shalyar*. According to Pir Luqman, one can become *pir* by inheritance, study or through appointment by the community, with Pir Luqman saying he inherited the title as well as studied for it. Seven followers of Pir Luqman who now have the rank of *pirak* are studying with him in Kurdistan to become *Pir* themselves.

Additionally, Pir Luqman also uses the concept of *mog* (موگ), or the descendants of Zoroaster, which he explained as being similar to the concept of *sayyid* in Islam.[41] In his view, only Kurds can be *mog* as Zoroaster was a Kurd, and only *mog* can attain the highest priestly ranks (Pir Luqman, personal communication, 28 July 2018). This concept seems to be an innovation; a hereditary priesthood based on a purported ancestral connection with Zoroaster is unfamiliar to Zoroastrianism, and certainly not one restricted solely to Kurds.

The clerical ranks used in the community headed by Awat Tayib differ from both the traditional Zoroastrian titles as well as those used by Pir Luqman. The priestly ranks in this community in sequential rank from lowest to highest are: *asrawan*, *mōbed*, *dastur*, *mog* and finally *pir*. Both Awat and Qasrok have the lowest rank of *asrawan*; Tayib explained that the community in the KRI is young, which is why there are no higher ranking priests (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 5 August 2018). While the title *mog* is also used in this community, it apparently lacks the hereditary concept Pir Luqman assigns to it.

Religious scripture

On the subject of religious scripture, both groups focus on the *Gatha*s and do not attach religious value to the other texts of the Avestan corpus[42] or

[39] In the Parsi and Iranian clerical hierarchy, the *hērbad* is the lowest rank, qualified for basic rituals only, followed by the *mōbed* who can officiate the *Vendidād* ceremony (when the *Vendidād*, a part of the Avesta, is recited) and finally the *dastur* or priest with authority (Boyce, 2001: 157; Kreyenbroek, 2012a).

[40] Pir Shalyar is a mythical figure celebrated in an annual feast in the Hawraman area, who, according to a legend, healed a princess; in one version of the story Pir Shalyar was a Zoroastrian leader (Rezaei, 2011; Rudaw, 2017b). The author could however not find any reliable references of the term Pir Shalyar being used for Zoroastrian clergy in the past.

[41] *Mog* was a generic term for Zoroastrian priests up to the tenth century CE (Boyce, 2001: 157). There is no indication that this was ever connected to purported descent from Zoroaster.

[42] The Avesta is the foundational scripture of Zoroastrianism; it is not a single book, but a collection of several texts composed in different eras containing prayers, hymns and religious laws. One of the texts in the Avesta is the *Yasna*, which consists of 72 sections. The *Gatha*s are a part of the *Yasna* and consist of verses written in Old Avestan (Kellens, 2011).

Zoroastrian writings of later eras like the *Dēnkard*[43] or *Bundahišn*.[44] Awat Tayib indicated that her community considers solely the *Gatha*s to have religious value, as they were composed by Zoroaster himself. The other components of the Avestan corpus are considered products of Iranian or Indian culture; while these texts are read, they do not have the religious importance of the *Gatha*s (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 23 June 2018). Pir Luqman also considers that only the *Gatha*s have religious value, disregarding the other parts of the Avesta as merely informative (Pir Luqman, personal communication, 28 July 2018). The *Gatha*s-centred approach of the two communities, in addition to their disinterest in traditional Zoroastrian religious rules, resembles the so-called reformists among 19th century Parsis. These reformists, under the influence of Western scholars and missionaries, came to denounce all writings beyond the *Gatha*s as corruptions of Zoroaster's message, thereby dispensing with the majority of religious rules and rituals that had defined their community for centuries (Boyce, 2001: 200-204, 213-214).

Conversion to Zoroastrianism

An important and controversial aspect of Kurdish Zoroastrianism is conversion. As there was no active Zoroastrian community in the area currently governed by the KRG before the 1990s, there would be no Zoroastrian community to speak of if not for new converts joining the faith. According to both leaders, Kurds and non-Kurds have converted into Zoroastrianism.[45] Tayib and Luqman both assert that converts are drawn to Zoroastrianism because they are disappointed in Islam and the perceived backwardness and violence associated with the religion, especially following the rise of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the massacres committed by this group. Additionally, Kurds are looking for their "true" religion, in this case Zoroastrianism. Informal conversations with converts in the Zoroastrian Centre near Salim Street confirmed these hypotheses. The process of conversion is similar for both communities: prospective converts are expected to first study the Zoroastrian faith and philosophy, and when it is deemed they have sufficient knowledge about Zoroastrianism, a conversion ceremony is held. Neither community has a set conversion curriculum; prospective converts are expected to read about Zoroastrianism and need to meet the priests to discuss their motivations for conversion and any other questions they might

[43] The *Dēnkard* is a 10th century CE compendium of Zoroastrian religious knowledge and exegesis written in Pahlavi (Gignoux, 2011).

[44] The *Bundahišn* is a Pahlavi compilation of cosmogony and cosmography drawn from Zoroastrian scripture. It underwent several redactions and was completed in the 9th century CE (MacKenzie, 1989).

[45] During field visits the author did not meet any Zoroastrians who were not of Kurdish descent. Additionally, all Zoroastrian literature available in the centres is in Kurdish or English, and Awat Tayib confirmed that religious ceremonies are conducted in Sorani and sometimes Badini (Kurmanjî). While this does not necessarily exclude Arabs, Turkmen or others joining the faith, the evidence seems to point to a primarily Kurdish audience within the movement.

have. Once the priests deem the convert ready, a conversion ceremony is held in which a belt (*kushti*) is tied around the waist of the convert. Both leaders stressed that conversion can never be forced and is only performed when asked by the prospective convert (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 27 May and 10 June 2017; Pir Luqman, personal communication, 26 August 2017). Even though Law no. 5 explicitly guarantees the right for every individual to disclose his or her religious identity, it is currently not possible for Zoroastrian converts to indicate Zoroastrianism as their religion when they apply for a national ID card.

Conversion is a contentious subject within Zoroastrianism. Since the Arab conquest of the Sassanid Empire, Zoroastrians in the Middle East have lived as minorities in states governed by Muslims who banned proselytising and conversion of non-Zoroastrians; conversion of Muslims to other religions is forbidden in Islam, and even in the present Middle East, few governments allow Muslims to convert. The Parsis in India faced similar restrictions as they were (and are) a small religious minority living in a predominantly Hindu society. Additionally the caste system of Indian society and socio-economic concerns discouraged conversion to Zoroastrianism.[46] Besides the restrictions of living as a minority among non-Zoroastrians, Zoroastrian communities also struggled with the question whether Zoroastrianism is a religion restricted to a specific ethnicity or community or a universalist creed. Zoroastrian scripture does not restrict conversion and actually encourages it, but due to the reasons mentioned earlier, many communities, especially in India, are very wary of conversion. Therefore it is no surprise that since the fall of the Sassanid Empire conversions seldom occurred, and even contemporary Zoroastrian communities around the world are split over whether conversion is accepted at all (Boyce, 2001: 174, 193; Saati, Pargol, 2011). This, however, apparently does not affect the willingness of Zoroastrians in the KRI to accept new converts, and both Awat Tayib and Pir Luqman indicated that thousands had joined Zoroastrianism over the past few years (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 27 May and 10 June 2017, 23 June 2018; Pir Luqman, personal communication, 26 August 2017 and 28 July 2018).

[46] An example of how Zoroastrians in India or Parsis had become more a socio-economic group or caste rather than a strictly religious community is the Petit vs Jijibhai or Parsi Panchayat case. In 1903, Suzanne Brière, a non-Zoroastrian French woman, had married the Parsi Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata and tried to convert to Zoroastrianism. At the time, the topic of conversion to Zoroastrianism was hotly debated in India, with orthodox Parsis rejecting the idea that someone not born into the community could undergo the Zoroastrian initiation ceremony. The question of Brière's conversion was brought to the Bombay High Court in 1908, which ultimately ruled that Brière could not partake in Parsi religious life and institutions. It is interesting to note that the ruling did not forbid conversion as such, but effectively excluded non-Parsis from Parsi religious life, showing how socio-economic considerations like caste and safeguarding the community's social welfare eclipsed the importance of religious rules in defining community membership (Sharafi, 2008: 159, 163-165, 174).

Besides internal theological differences, it is important to examine to what extent the predominantly Muslim society in the KRI is willing to accept conversion. While the religious landscape in the KRI is diverse, some non-Muslim groups like the Yezidis simply do not accept conversion at all (Kizilhan, 2017: 2), while others, like the various Christian groups that in theory can proselityse, do not do so, at least not publicly. The public acceptance of conversion by Zoroastrians is therefore unsurprisingly attracting criticism and animosity from some Muslims in the KRI. In February 2017, for example, Mala Hasib, a Kurdish Islamic preacher at the Mala Rasul mosque in Slemani and Kurdistan Islamic Union (*Yekgirtûy Islâmî Kurdistan*, KIU) member, went as far as stating that under Islamic rule converts have three days to return to Islam or face execution. Despite their differences, Tayib and Luqman both condemned Hasib's statement (Rudaw, 2017a; Shafaq News, 2017a; Shafaq News, 2017b). Tayib later pressed charges in court under Law No. 5, which resulted in Hasib being fined but not criminalised. The case was reopened in May 2018 after Hasib pressed charges against Tayib for calling him a terrorist, and at the moment of writing no final conclusion has been reached yet (Awat Tayib, personal communication, 25 May 2018). Others have accused the Zoroastrians of being a political movement cloaking itself in religion (Al Jazeera, 2015). On the issue of conversion, Sheikh Ibrahim indicated that Islamic scholars have no unified viewpoint on the matter; some say converts should be killed, while others say people who leave Islam should be returned to the fold through dialogue only. Personally he believes that an open conflict between the Zoroastrian and Islamic communities in the KRI is unlikely, given that in his opinion Zoroastrianism is a peaceful religion which does not intend to attack or eradicate Islam. Additionally, he stated that religious strife is not a part of Kurdish history or culture (Sheikh Ibrahim Mohamed Taher Barzanji, personal communication, 11 November 2017). However as the Zoroastrian community grows and attracts more attention, tension with the Muslim community and negative backlash from Muslims is expected to increase rather than subside.

Kurdish Zoroastrians and Zoroastrians abroad

There are two main aspects of relations between Kurdish Zoroastrians and Zoroastrians elsewhere: how the Kurdish Zoroastrians position themselves within Zoroastrianism and to what extent the Kurdish Zoroastrian movement is accepted by Zoroastrian communities abroad. As described earlier, both community leaders interviewed during this research have connections with Zoroastrian communities in Europe, and reach out to communities outside Kurdistan. Both leaders completed at least part of their formation as priests outside the KRI, and in April 2017, for example, Awat Tayib visited the California Zoroastrian Center in the US. Pir Luqman is also a member of the World Zoroastrian Organisation (WZO). This seems to indicate that Kurdish Zoroastrians are actively looking for contact with Zoroastrians abroad, and

have little intention of establishing Kurdish Zoroastrianism as an isolated splinter group outside the global Zoroastrian community. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the new Kurdish Zoroastrians opted for a Zoroastrianism built on Kurdish nationalist ideas, rather than reconstructing the religion based on beliefs and practices as found among Iranian or Indian communities, which would presumably facilitate their integration into Zoroastrianism worldwide.

The extent to which Zoroastrians abroad are accepting of the new Kurdish Zoroastrianism seemingly depends on the particular community. According to Shahin Bekhradnia, the WZO is open to new Zoroastrians in general and has no issues with accepting the Kurdish Zoroastrian community. She stated that Iranian Zoroastrians are usually more accepting towards conversion than Parsis; this openness to new Zoroastrians includes Iranian Zoroastrian communities in the US and the UK. Orthodox Parsis, on the other hand, reject conversion to Zoroastrianism, and consider that only people born into the faith can be Zoroastrian. It is to be noted that their rejection of new Zoroastrians comes from a general opposition towards conversion, with its origins long before the emergence of Kurdish Zoroastrianism, and is not specifically aimed at the new Kurdish Zoroastrians (Shahin Bekhradnia, personal communication 2, 11 and 12 February 2018). As the movement is relatively new, it remains to be seen if the Kurdish Zoroastrians will maintain their "Zoroastrianism is Kurdish" narrative, or adapt to more widely accepted views that correspond with how other Zoroastrian communities see their prophet.

In short, Kurdish Zoroastrianism in the KRI has distinct theological features shared across both communities living there: a liberal, secular and feminist interpretation of Zoroastrianism, the rejection of most religious rules except the "good thoughts, good words and good actions" tenet, the acceptance and encouragement of conversion, the rejection of scripture beyond the *Gatha*s and the claim that Zoroaster was Kurdish. Given these similarities and the fact that both leaders were active in the Kurdish diaspora, it can be presumed that both groups draw on a common theological narrative originating from Kurdish Zoroastrians abroad. When and where this narrative arose was, however, not examined in this study and would be an interesting question for follow-up research. In contrast to these similarities, the leaders of the two groups use different clerical ranks and have differing views on their own level of religious authority: where Awat Tayib indicated there cannot be high ranking priests in the KRI because the Zoroastrian community was only recently established, Pir Luqman declared himself the leading Zoroastrian authority of all Kurdistan. It is unclear whether these differences are expressions of differing Zoroastrian thought among the diaspora or if they originated locally within the communities in the KRI.

Zoroastrianism in Kurdistan: A new religion in times of turmoil

The findings described earlier finally allow for an analysis of where to place Kurdish Zoroastrianism as a religious phenomenon. Regarding the origins of the new Kurdish Zoroastrianism, it can be concluded that Kurdish nationalism and the desire to return to an "original" Kurdish religion are defining aspects of the movement. Kurdish Zoroastrianism in the KRI also aims to present itself as upholding liberal values like gender equality, ecology and religious tolerance, cladding these in Zoroastrian theology. Therefore, Kurdish Zoroastrianism can be seen as a drastic evolution of earlier nationalist thinking that imagined Zoroastrianism as the true Kurdish religion from an idealised past. The difference between the movement that emerged in the KRI since 2015 and earlier Kurdish nationalist thinking about Zoroastrianism is that now people are openly converting to Zoroastrianism and have established Zoroastrianism as a living faith with officially recognised institutions.[47] As mentioned earlier, the exact number of new Zoroastrians is not clear, but the author attended a Yalda[48] ceremony organized by Yasna on 20 December 2018 in Hewlêr as well as a Zoroastrian-Muslim marriage ceremony in Slemani on 19 March 2019. This seems to indicate that there is indeed a living Zoroastrian community beyond the community leaders interviewed for this article.[49]

The main remaining question now is why Zoroastrianism emerged as a living religion in the KRI at this particular point in history, and why the new movement apparently found a ready audience in the KRI. Here, I will attempt to analyse the rise of Zoroastrianism through the lens of religious market structures, a theoretic model explaining dynamics of religious life borrowed from the study of economic market behaviour. This theoretical model is a useful tool to analyse the growth of Kurdish Zoroastrianism in comparison with the growth of other religious movements in different places and eras.

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[47] Szanto (2018) describes Kurdish Zoroastrianism as an invented tradition and furthermore reports the use of actors of the local actors' guild during religious ceremonies organised by Awat Tayib's community, however this was not witnessed by the author. At least some of the participants, as well as visitors in the centres (beyond the interviewed leaders) the author visited, however, openly identified as Zoroastrians, which is sufficient evidence to state that Kurdish Zoroastrianism is a real religious movement, even though the size of its following is difficult to establish. If one subscribes to the view of religion as a social construct (as the author does), all religions are assumed to be invented traditions which are constantly interpreted and re-interpreted by their followers. Kurdish Zoroastrianism or any other religious tradition practiced in the KRI or elsewhere are no exceptions to this.

[48] Yalda (also known as *shab-e chelleh*) is a feast celebrated at the winter solstice. Yalda is celebrated by Iranian peoples, not just Kurds or Zoroastrians.

[49] The Yalda celebration was organised at the Catholic University in Hewlêr and featured a sacred flame as well as Zoroastrian imagery. Participants included Zoroastrians, non-Zoroastrians and representatives from the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. At the wedding celebration at the Ramada hotel in Slemani, a Zoroastrian ceremony with a ceremonial fire preceded the actual wedding, this fire ceremony was conducted outside the main hall following complaints from the Muslim family. A chanting Zoroastrian priest circled through the wedding hall accompanied by musicians playing the *daf* (drum) before the bride and the groom entered the hall.

Using the religious market model, one can easily identify the importance of government regulations on the particular example of Kurdish Zoroastrianism. The implementation of Law no. 5 of 2015 opened up the religious market in the KRI by extending official recognition and protection to religious minorities besides the dominant Sunni Islam, thereby allowing other religious "firms" like Zoroastrianism to openly compete for adherents in a way that was not previously possible. While the opening of the religious market explains why new or alternative religious movements in general would be expected to grow in the KRI since 2015, it does not explain why Kurdish Zoroastrianism in particular grew, while other religious groups did not. Why has there not been a growth of the other religious components mentioned in the law like Yezidis and Christians? Clearly there must be reasons inherent to Kurdish Zoroastrianism that allow it to compete for adherents more effectively than other religions in the KRI.

A partial explanation for Zoroastrianism's relative success can be found through examining the local competitors. The Yezidi and Yarsani communities are based on kinship and tribal ties and are led by a hereditary priestly caste, claiming divine lineages and therefore do not proselytise, excluding themselves from the religious market (Kizilhan, 2017: 2; Langer, 2010: 3-4). Most of the various Christian denominations found in the KRI are linked to the Assyrian community in the region, and could be seen as ethno-religious groups rather than purely faith-based communities. A similar argument could be made for the Faily Kurds,[50] who differ from the majority population in the KRI not only in their Shi'a faith but also in their language (van Bruinessen, 1991: 3-9). This would make these groups less competitive in attracting new members from the predominantly Sunni Kurdish population in the region, even if these groups would try to proselytise. Kurdish Zoroastrianism, on the other hand, openly welcomes new converts.

The relative disadvantages of the competition are compounded by two advantages particular to Kurdish Zoroastrianism. First of all, there is the Kurdish nationalist aspect. As discussed earlier, long before the current Kurdish Zoroastrianism emerged, the key tenet of Zoroastrianism being the original religion of the Kurds had already been propagated by some Kurdish nationalists, albeit without leading to the open establishment of Zoroastrianism as a living religion. The strong connection the interviewed Zoroastrian leaders in the KRI stressed between the religion and Kurdish national identity was therefore already a familiar concept among at least some Kurdish nationalists, making Kurdish Zoroastrianism more attractive for those Kurds looking for their "original" ancestral faith. Second, there is the historic context in which

[50] Faily Kurds are a Kurdish community living in the areas on the border between Iraq and Iran. They are predominantly Shi'a and speak a distinct Kurdish language (McDowall, 2004: 11; Minority Rights, 2017).

Kurdish Zoroastrianism emerged. In the period leading to the passing of Law No. 5 and the growth of Kurdish Zoroastrianism, the KRI and the region in general were facing the violent extremism of ISIL, with KRG Peshmerga and security forces fighting ISIL inside and on the borders of the KRI.[51] Pir Luqman indicated that the horrific acts committed by ISIL encouraged Kurds to leave Islam and embrace Zoroastrianism (Pir Luqman, personal communication, 26 August 2017), a sentiment that new converts also indicated in informal conversations with the author and in interviews with media and other researchers (Redfern, 2017; Szanto, 2018: 5-7).

For Kurdish Muslims shocked by the brutality and violence of ISIL and other extremist Islamist groups, the religious tolerance, gender equality and secularism propagated by Kurdish Zoroastrianism offers a clearly contrasted religious alternative, while still steering clear of atheism and the complete rejection of religion. Interestingly, Shahin Bekhradnia drew a parallel between the influence of Islamic extremism on conversion to Zoroastrianism in Iraq and Iran, explaining that some Muslims in Iran[52] converted to Zoroastrianism as a form of protest against the Shi'a theocratic regime. She added that other Iranian converts feel Islam is alien to Iranian culture, mirroring the Kurdish feelings of returning to their "original" religion (Shahin Bekhradnia, personal communication, 11 February 2018 and 2 May 2018). Unlike converts in the KRI, new Zoroastrians in Iran are at risk of criminal prosecution and severe punishment (Choksy, 2012: 10).

In summary, the rise of Kurdish Zoroastrianism can be explained by a combination of factors from the past and the present. The Kurdish nationalist idea of Zoroastrianism as the original religion of the Kurds preceded the emergence of Zoroastrianism in the KRI as a "religious extension" of a Kurdish desire to have a distinct national identity. The reasons why Kurdish Zoroastrianism emerged in this particular timeframe are however rooted in recent events, namely legal changes and a counter-reaction to the Islamic extremism of ISIL that swept the region during the past few years. Islamic extremism is not a new phenomenon in the KRI or the Middle East in general, but combined with a permissive legal framework, the rise of ISIL ironically was one of the conditions enabling the emergence of Zoroastrianism in the KRI. Islamic extremism and nationalist feelings could have caused underground sympathy for Zoroastrianism, but without a legal framework protecting the Zoroastrian community, it would have likely not emerged as openly as it did.

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[51] The military forces of the KRG are called Peshmerga, literally meaning "those who face death."

[52] It is important to note two significant differences between new Zoroastrians in Iran and in the KRI. Unlike Zoroastrians in the KRI, new Zoroastrians in Iran have different ethnic backgrounds and do not hail from one specific ethnic group. The restrictive religious climate in Iran prohibits them from converting openly in the country, and Zoroastrian priests in Iran are therefore reluctant to perform conversion in Iran at all, forcing many to move abroad to convert (personal communication with Shahin Bekhradnia, 2 May 2018).

The combination of historical nationalist ideas, legislative changes and Islamic extremism thus created the conditions for the emergence of Zoroastrianism as a living religion in the KRI.

Conclusion: The future of Zoroastrianism in the KRI

Since 2015, Zoroastrianism has emerged as a new religious movement in the KRI. This movement is best described as a hybrid of religious revival and Kurdish nationalism. In contrast to a number of earlier Kurdish nationalists, who merely idealised an imagined forlorn Kurdish Zoroastrian past, the current Zoroastrian movement in the KRI attempted and succeeded in establishing an active Zoroastrian religious community. What now to expect from this Kurdish Zoroastrianism? Is Zoroastrianism here to stay in the KRI, and how will the movement develop in the near future?

Two main factors will determine the future of Zoroastrianism in the KRI. We begin with the question of how Kurdish Zoroastrianism will develop internally and connect with Zoroastrian communities abroad. The nationalist claims of Kurdish Zoroastrianism might attract followers among the Kurdish population in the KRI and in the diaspora, but are unlikely to contribute to the acceptance of the movement by other, non-Kurdish Zoroastrian communities. Additionally, it is unclear to what extent the eclectic theology of Zoroastrians in the KRI, disconnected from the millennia-old traditions upheld by the Parsi and Iranian communities, can form a basis of mutual understanding and cooperation with Zoroastrians abroad. Finally, it remains to be seen how internal disputes will affect the cohesion of the Kurdish Zoroastrian movement; even in this nascent phase, the community in the KRI is already split between two competing centres of leadership. Internal disputes and a disconnection from global Zoroastrianism could easily turn the nascent movement into an isolated, factionalised community, which would be detrimental for the chances of Zoroastrianism to develop into a regular, sustainable component of the religious landscape in the KRI.

Next, there is the issue of external acceptance of Kurdish Zoroastrianism. While the current legislative framework enabled the growth of Zoroastrianism in the KRI, changing attitudes and policies within the KRG could easily force the Zoroastrian movement to abandon its public appearance and go underground. The small number of Zoroastrians and their lack of political influence means the Zoroastrian minority is at the mercy of the KRG, with limited capacities to push back in case a government less supportive of religious minorities were to take power. Besides potential negative reactions from the government, Zoroastrians in the KRI will also have to deal with a majority Muslim population, some of whom are already displaying hostility towards the openness with which conversion is accepted. Finally, extremist groups from outside the KRI could also target the Zoroastrians; the genocide committed by

ISIL on the Yezidi community in Shengal (Sinjar) in the summer of 2014 is a stark reminder of what can happen to religious minorities in the region if religious extremists gain power.

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