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Islamic Universalism or Ethno-nationalism? Exploring identity salience within a Kurdish migrant community in Britain

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Abstract

This article examines identity salience among members of a Kurdish Muslim migrant community in England. The study, in contrast to previous research on the Kurdish diaspora, focuses on religious identity in a small-city context, with recently arrived migrants, predominately from Iraqi Kurdistan. In-depth interviews highlight how ethnic repression within sending nations results in greater politicisation of ethnicity and in turn salience over all other identities, even within a non-Muslim setting. As such, findings did not demonstrate growing salience of religious identity over ethno-national identities, in order to close ranks with other Muslim minorities in a local context, as described in literature on 'Islamic diasporas'.

Keywords: Muslims in the West; Kurdish; refugees; social identity; political mobilisation

Abstract in Kurmanji

Gerdûnparêziya îslamî ya netewparêziya nijadî? Vekolîna girîngiya nasnameyî di civateke Kurdên koçber li Brîtanyayê de

Ev nivîsar girîngiya nasnameyî ya li nav endamên civateke Kurdên misilman ên koçber li Inglîstanê vedikole. Li berevajiyê lêkolînên bihorî yê li ser diyasporaya kurd, ev vekolîn li ser nasnameya dînî ya koçberên nûhatî, pîranyî û wan ji Kurdistanê Êraqê ve, di çarçoveya bajarokeke piçûk de radweste. Hevdiîtinên hûrgilî bal dikişînin ser politîzêbûna bêhtir a ku bi encama zordestiya nijadî li neteweyên birêkêr pêk hat û, li ser vê, girîngiya mezîtir a nasnameya nijadî li ber hemû nasnameyên din, beta di hawirdoreke ne-misilman de jî. Weha, van encam hane girîngiya zêde ya nasnameya olî li hember nasnameyên nijadî-neteweyî nîşan nedaye, li berevajiyê destbîratiya berêmtî ya bi kêmnetaşîyên misilman ên din re ku di edebiyata li ser 'diyasporayên misilman' de tê dîtin.

Abstract in Sorani

Îslamî cîhanî yan nasêwnallîzmî êtnî? Lêkolîneweyek le ser giringî nasnamey êtnî le nêwan komellêk koçberî kurd le le Berîtanya

Em wîtare şîrovek giringî nasnamey êtnî le nêwan endamanî komellêk koçberî musullmanî kurd dekat le Berîtaniya. Twêjîneweke be pêçewaney twêjînewekanî pêstir le ser rewendî kurd le tarawge, tîşk de xate ser nasnamey ayînî le nêw koçberî tazegestî le Kurdistanî Êraqewe, le çarçewey şarêkî biçûkda. Çanpêkewtinî dîrxayan derîxistwe ke çansanewey êtnî le wîlatî koçkirdineve debête hoy besiyasîbûnî nasnamey êtnî û zallbûnî be ser nasnamekanîtir da, tenanet le nêwendî namusullmanekanîş da. Le ber ewe encamekan zallî nasnamey ayînî be ser nasnamey êtnî

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dermaxen bo nîzîkbûnêwe le gell kamayetîy musulmanekanîtir le nêwendî nawxoda, wek leserçawekanîtir le ser musulmananî tarawge baskerawî.

Abstract in Zazaki

Unîversalizmo Îslamî yan Neteweperwerîya Etnîke? Komelêka kurdanê koçberan ê Bîrîtanya mîyan de giranîya nasnameyî ser o cigêrayîş

Na meqale mîyanê endamanê komelêka kurdanê musulmananê koçberan de giranîya nasnameyî ser o analizêkê o. Duştê cigêrayîşanê verênan de ke derbeqê dîyasporaya kurdan de ameyê kerdene, no cigêrayîş çarçewaya şaristanêkê qijkekî de bale dana nasnameyê dînî yê koçberanê neweyan ê ke zafêrî Kurdistanê Iraqî ra ameyî ser. Roportajê bidetayî musnenê ke zereyê welatanê rusnayo:can ra tedaya etnîke senî etnîsîte kena sîyasîyêre û eynî dem de cayê nê nasnameyî nasnameyanê bînan ver a kena giranêr - herqîşas nê nasnameyî musulman nêbê kî. Herqîşas ke lîteraturê 'Dîyasporayanê Muslumanan' de winî binusîyo zî, wîna aseno ke seba nêzdîbîyayîşê bi kêmmeteweyanê musulmananê bînan, giranîya nasnameyê dînî duştê nasnameyanê etnîkanê neteweyîyan de zêde nêbena.

Introduction

In the last two decades, studies have continued to describe the salience of religious identities among Muslim minorities living in the West (Saeed, et al., 1999; Adamson, 2011, Abbas, 2020). In other words, several scholars have shown that when given the option to describe themselves by an ethnic or religious identity, Muslims are more likely to choose 'Muslim' rather than, for example, 'Somali' or 'Pakistani', as the identity which is the most important to them (Saint-Blancat, 2002; Werbner, 2003; Hussain and Sherif, 2015).

Adamson (2011: 900) explains that although Muslims have been part of European society for many years, 'Over the past two decades, both Muslim populations and state actors have increasingly deployed the category of "Muslim" as an identity marker'. It is against the backdrop of the literature on the salience of religious identity for Muslim groups in Britain that this paper explores how a recently arrived (less than ten years since initial migration) Kurdish Muslim migrant community constructed their religious and ethnic identities within their new setting.

Kurds are considered the largest ethnic group without a nation state of their own (Aziz, 2011; Hassan, 2013). After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France were responsible for the division of its former territories, including the landmass which was home to millions of Kurds, referred to as Kurdistan (Hassanpour, 1992). However, Kurds were denied self-governance and, instead, the population was partitioned across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and smaller segments of Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (McDowall, 2004). According to estimates, Kurds constitute approximately 20% of Turkey's population, 27% of Iraq's, 15% of Iran's, and less than 10% of the total population of Syria (McDowall, 2004).

The first Kurdish refugees began to arrive in Britain in the 1950s (Romano, 2002). However, the most recent wave of Kurdish migration to Britain occurred as a result of the United States invading Iraq in the early 1990s. Iraqi Kurds, who had long been the target of ethnic hostility, became increasingly vulnerable and, as a result, many left the country to seek refuge elsewhere (Aziz, 2011; Wahlbeck, 2019). Britain was the destination for many Kurdish asylum seekers from Iraq, and growing pockets of Kurdish populations began to take form within many English towns and cities, including the one in which this research was conducted.

This study, in contrast to previous research on the Kurdish diaspora (e.g. Wahlbeck, 1999; Griffiths, 2000), focuses on religious identity in a small-town context with recently arrived

migrants, predominately from Iraqi Kurdistan. In-depth interviews were conducted with Kurdish Muslim migrants who had established a community in the north of England. The town is also home to longer-settled Muslim communities who first arrived in the area in the early 1960s, mainly from Pakistan-administered Kashmir and the Middle East (Hussain and Choudhury, 2007). In adopting this focus, the research set out to explore the following research question: How are religious and ethnic identities constructed by the recently arrived Kurdish migrant community members in a small northern town, which has existent, established Muslim minority communities?

This article first examines the salience of religious identity, with a focus on debates regarding the increased prominence of Muslim identity in Western settings. It then goes on to discuss key themes that emerged from the interviews against the backdrop of previous scholarship on Kurdish diaspora identity.

The Salience of Religious Identity

It is now widely acknowledged within the social sciences that identities are neither fixed nor intrinsic but are constructed and multiple (Brubaker, 2002; Morawska, 2018). For example, commentators have pointed towards the shift in language on 'race' and identity to argue that the way in which we think about our identities is constantly under construction (Nagel, 1994; Cornell and Hartmann, 1998). Scholarship on ethnic, national, and religious identities has demonstrated the prevalence of hybrid and hyphenated identities (Saeed, et al., 1999; Fenton, 2011). Yet, among the multiple identities one self-assigns at any given time, theorists of identity hierarchies argue that individuals rank their identities in terms of salience (Serpe and Stryker, 2011) or prominence (Brenner, et al., 2014) depending on how committed an individual is to a given discrete 'role' identity. In this view, the prominence or salience of an identity is influenced by processes taking place through the interaction we have with others and within social structures. Stets and Burke (2005: 11) further explain:

The prominence of an identity depends upon the degree to which one: 1) gets support from others for an identity 2) is committed to an identity, and 3) receives extrinsic and intrinsic reward from the role identity. The more prominent the role identity, the more likely it will be activated and performed in a situation...What importantly influences the salience of an identity is the degree of commitment one has to the identity [in the form of] the number of persons to whom one is connected through having a particular identity [and] the stronger or deeper ties to others based on a particular identity.

Like Brenner et al. (2014), Serpe and Stryker (2011) argue that the more commitment an individual has to an identity, the higher up it will feature on the salience hierarchy. Therefore, both theories emphasise the importance placed on an identity in the process leading to it becoming the principal way in which one views and describes oneself.

Literature on Muslim communities in the West has increasingly pointed towards the salience of religion above other forms of collective identifiers such as ethnicity and nationality (Saint-Blancat, 2002; Peek, 2005; Abbas 2020). Hutnik's (1985) study of Muslims reported that religion was listed as an important identity item by 80% of his respondents. Saeed and colleagues (1999) conducted self-identification surveys in Glasgow among second and third-generation Pakistani Muslims. The findings demonstrated that 'Muslim' and then 'Pakistani'

identities were the two most frequent categories mentioned. However, it is noteworthy that ‘Muslim’ (85 %) was chosen nearly three times as often as ‘Pakistani’ (30 %) by participants.

La Brooy’s (2008) study of young Muslims in Britain not only found a propensity for salient religious identities, but also described them as ‘essentialist’, suggesting that religion was the only important identity for many of her participants. Studies in the United States have also evidenced a trend towards the prominence of religious identity over other role identities for Muslims. For example, Peek (2005) explored the process by which religion evolved from an ‘ascribed’ passive identity to a ‘declared’ active and visible identity for participants in her study. The commitment towards a religious identity was often prompted by a desire to portray Muslims in a more positive light in the post 9/11 era.

Several studies have attempted to understand the growing salience of religious over other identities, including ethnic, for many Muslims living in the West. Literature attempting to explain this trend falls within two broad overlapping categories: 1) socio-political factors, and 2) the ‘Ummah affect’.

Socio-political factors

The assertion of a more religious identity by Muslims in Britain was facilitated primarily by the Rushdie affair, which set the scene for the latest surge in Islamophobia in Britain (Mohammad, 1999). The anti-Muslim backlash of 9/11 and the 7/7 London bombings led to a more pronounced prejudice against Muslims and intolerance towards Islam in Britain and the West (Kundnani, 2001; Hussain, et al., 2017). An opinion poll in *The Guardian* newspaper demonstrated the isolation that Muslims believe they face, with nearly 70 % stating that they felt ‘the rest of society does not regard them as an integral part of life in Britain’ (Kelso and Vasagar, 2002).

Arweck (2017) describes the increasing self-identification of British Muslims as such, rather than using ethno-national labels, as a reaction to perceived external rejection by the mainstream majority. Discussions regarding the salience of religious identity vis-à-vis discrimination after 9/11 (Hafez, 2018) state, in particular, that the politicisation of Muslims as a threat to the West has impacted how Muslims view themselves as a construct within Western popular imaginations. Elahi and Khan (2017: 5) write:

The first change is that the context – domestically and, perhaps more importantly, globally – has transformed fundamentally. After 9/11 and 7/7, Muslims became a greater focus of policymakers in the UK and around the world, but framed largely in terms of terrorism or as a civilizational threat. This framing of Muslims is, of course, centuries old, but has re-emerged in new and toxic ways since we published our report two decades ago.

The increasing normalisation of Islamophobia was commented on by the British lawyer and politician Baroness Warsi in 2011, when she remarked that anti-Muslim discourse had now passed the ‘dinner table test’ and had become a form of bigotry which was acceptable within society (Elahi and Khan, 2017). Extensive literature on the subject demonstrates how Muslims are believed to be deviant and problematic (Hafez, 2018; Law, et al., 2019; Abbas, 2020), yet, for Muslims themselves, this image does not ring true (Elahi and Khan, 2017). Through commitment to being Muslim in the face of dominance, Muslims seek to reclaim ownership of their identity and reconstruct the way it is presented within the prevailing political discourse

(Arweck, 2017; McKenna and Francis, 2018). Therefore, the commitment towards religious identity is a direct result of socio-political factors which have an impact on the way the identity is constructed within the mainstream (Modood, 2003; Anwar, 2005; Law, et al., 2019).

The Ummah as Islamic Universalism

Modood (2003: 101) described how ‘Muslims [now] have the most extensive and developed discourses of unity, common circumstance and common victimhood among non-EU origin peoples in the EU’. This sense of ‘common victimhood’ has provided an important bridge for ethnic and national differentiators among Muslim groups. It has led to the Muslim identity becoming a crucial unifier and a successful vehicle for political mobilisation. As Ballard (1996: 124) writes:

Given that Islam is manifestly a sophisticated world religion, which is at the very least a match for Christianity, and better still its long historical role as Christianity’s “bête noir” [sic], it provides a wonderfully effective alter with which to identify, in response to White, European post-Christian denigration.

Placing emphasis on a Muslim identity is not new. Berggren (2007: 72) argues that many scholars claim religion is an essential identifier for Muslims as a result of the concept of what they describe as the ‘Ummah Islamiyah (Islamic community of believers)’, hailed as the ‘most important collective to which one can and ought to belong’. The concept of a united Muslim community in the West, as the Ummah, is discussed as a contributing factor in the mind-set of many Muslims who identify themselves as being part of a Muslim diaspora (Werbner, 2003; Hussain, 2008; Abbas, 2020).

In this view, emphasis is placed on religious identity in order to close ranks with other Muslim minority groups. Strength in numbers is, of course, an important motivation for minority groups in attempting to unify with other minority groups, as demonstrated by minorities in Britain attempting to mobilise under the common feature of ‘non-Whiteness’ in the 1980s (Modood, 2003). The attraction for Muslims to unite by asserting a religious identity is the empowerment gained by the transformation of their minority group status to form part of a global counterforce (Khan, 2000; Abbas, 2020).

Based on extensive literature regarding the salience of Muslim identity among those in the West and the revival of collective Muslim identities as the Ummah, this study set out to explore the salience of religious identity among a recently arrived community of Kurdish Muslims in a small northern English town, who commenced migration to the area less than ten years before the interviews were conducted. In doing so, this study adds important additional features for exploring collective identity among the Kurdish diaspora – namely the impact of geographical distance from other longer-established Kurdish urban hubs in the UK, as well as a focus on religious identity.

Methodology

This study was conducted in a northern town in England, which became home to an increasing number of Kurdish inhabitants from the early 2000s. At the time of the study, the Kurdish population within the town was estimated to be between 1,500 and 2,000. The vast majority of Kurds in the area were from Iraq, with smaller numbers from Iran and Turkey. As Baser (2018) discusses, the majority of Kurds from Iraq who arrived around this period

were a combination of civilians escaping war and political activists, both seeking asylum in Britain. This was reflected within the sample of interviewees in this study. Furthermore, all participants identified as Sunni, in keeping with the majority of Kurds in Iraq (Pew Survey, 2011), despite the fact that there are also Shia and Alevi Kurds, as well as non-Muslims such as Yazidi (van Bruinessen, 1992; Jenkins, et al., 2018).

As a result, the composition of participants in this study differed from many previous studies of Kurdish communities in the UK, such as Wahlbeck's (1999) and Griffiths' (2000), which are based in London, with the majority of Kurdish participants originating from Turkey. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-one Kurdish residents of the town during three months in 2009. All participants in this study entered the UK as asylum seekers, and the majority had been granted permanent residency, known as indefinite leave to remain. Several participants were interviewed more than once, and a professional interpreter assisted with interviews when requested. The majority of participants were adult males, reflecting the demographic nature of the population under study; however, five female respondents also took part in the study.

Participants were asked to describe themselves in their own vernacular, thinking about how they want others to understand their identity. For example, they were asked "How would you describe yourself?", and "If other people want to categorise you, what label or category would you choose for yourself?" Many participants discussed familiarity with being categorised in official terms, as a result of undergoing the asylum process and coming into contact with bureaucratic procedures. Interviewees were also asked about their group or collective identity – in other words, which group or community they belong to, if any. During the discussion, participants were asked questions regarding the asylum and migration experience, interaction with other local ethnic minority communities, accessing information and support, and the kinds of community activities and organisation they engage with, including mosques.

The author also conducted participant observation while spending time with interviewees in their homes and within two local Kurdish business hubs, a café, and a shop specialising in supplying the Kurdish community with clothes, music, and memorabilia imported from Iraqi Kurdistan.

Findings

During interviews, all respondents placed greater emphasis on their Kurdish identity when asked both how they describe themselves and how they want others to view them. Discussions were commonplace around the difficulty of explaining what being a Kurd was, as exemplified by the following quote:

People don't understand about the Kurds, or the ethnicity of the Kurds. If someone asks me where I'm from I say I'm Kurdish but they don't understand where I'm from, what they [Kurds] are, so I say I am Kurdish from the Iraqi part. And it's the same situation for the Kurds from the other parts.

The salience of Kurdish identity among the participants in this study can be understood in relation to the perceived subjugation experienced as an ethnic group. Interviewees described how, as a result of marginalisation felt by Kurds within the nation-states they left behind, there remained a desire to assert a Kurdish identity over identities ascribed to them, such as 'Iraqi'.

When you meet a single Kurdish person wherever you go, he doesn't want to call himself Turkish or Iraqi, he wants to say he is Kurdish, but due to the political situation, he has to say he belongs to one of the states in order to be recognised.

Similar to arguments presented on the growing salience of religious identity for Muslims in the West is the impact external threat has on individual and collective ethnic identities. Nagel (1994) and Fenton (2011) describe how identities are negotiated, defined and produced through social interaction inside and outside communities. When such interaction, whether individual or institutional, results in negative outcomes, one response is to strengthen affiliation with the identity which is most negatively perceived. This can lead to one identity becoming more salient than others as a response to social context and structures. Bobrow (1996), Gündüz-Hoşgör and Smits (2002), and Baser and Ashok (2010) explore Kurdish identity as a constructed identity used by groups to strengthen their social position. They argue that the Kurdish example demonstrates how suppressed ethnic identities become particularly prominent in situations of uncertainty or threat. The perceived threat towards the Kurdish identity presented by the aforementioned authors relates to their position as an ethnic minority in a nation-state, where the power is held by the ethnic majority.

The redrawing of state boundaries as a result of French and British imperialism in the Middle East, together with the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, resulted in the physical separation of the Kurds into newly formed nation-states. Because of this division of their lands, Kurds began living under differing government policies which almost entirely catered to the ethnic majorities (van Bruinessen, 1992; Gurses, 2015). Turkish, Persian or Arabic were declared state languages in the countries in which Kurds had now become citizens (Hassan, 2013). Consequently, Kurdish cultural and linguistic traditions became marginal and, in the case of Turkey, outlawed. Despite such rampant assimilation efforts on the part of policy makers who, faced with a sizable minority population, attempted to mitigate any potential threat to their nation-states (Eccarius-Kelly, 2001), Kurdish identity remained resilient (Romano, 2002).

The development of resistance movements in response to government policies resulted in a cycle of ethnic conflict. Intense periods of upheaval left many with a strong sense of injustice. Discussions describing feelings of oppression based on ethno-national identity were a common feature within all interviews. The quotes below demonstrate frustrations regarding the loss of self-determination as a result of the state boundaries within which Kurdish homelands are confined.

Because Kurds in the past history have always been persecuted and under the hands of the ruling regimes we were always treated harshly. Therefore, we always see and always hope that those four parts, we don't say pieces, we say parts that should be linked together again as they were.

For all our lives we've had a very hard time, for a hundred, two hundred years we've only seen sadness. It's like they cut our country with scissors, and we will never be happy.

Another important feature, in regard to settlement within Europe, is how Kurds politically engage with the host country, through applying a decolonial lens for approaching the Kurdish question. Demir (2017) discusses how diaspora Kurds have been able to challenge both oppression within the nation-states they left but also the ongoing legacy of European

colonialism which led to the very carving up of territories they challenge. She highlights political activism aimed towards the governments of host countries, which led to the departure, in these countries, from rhetoric commonly used by sending countries. For example, she argues that Kurds were successful in challenging the labelling of Kurdish organisations as terrorist (as in Turkey), which led to Kurdish fighters being presented as allies within the British media in its reporting of the Syrian war. Lobbying the British government and reminding them of their role in the predicament Kurds face was also discussed by some participants in this study. In particular, interviewees shared how they would insist on being recorded as Kurds rather than Iraqis on forms, despite a Kurdish category not being officially recognised within British data collection exercises.

Religious identity

Expressing a salient Kurdish identity did not undermine participants' religiosity. Islam, as a religion, was discussed to be of great significance for many respondents, who described themselves as practising Sunni Muslims. Observations suggested this was the case. During interviews conducted in homes, it was common to see monthly prayer timetables on walls and prayer mats visible in several of the houses, similarly described by Rouen's study (2015). Participants spoke about religion as an important personal aspect of their lives, rather than the primary source for collective identity. Here, religion was viewed as a spiritual matter, not a matter of political or ethnic identity. It was clear that there was no contradiction with being a Muslim by faith and the salience of a Kurdish ethnic identity for the respondents, and discussions with participants on the subject provided an important reminder that religiosity does not equate with religious identity.

A study conducted in Europe using the Centrality of Religiosity Scale by Huber (2011) reported a key differentiation between the 'centrality' or significance of religiosity and the concept of religious identity. The scale measured the centrality of religiosity not only by public participation in religious services and attending places of worship, but also by private practice, through questions such as 'how often do you pray?' and experience, as in, 'how often do you experience situations where you have the feeling that God or something divine intervenes in your life?' Survey respondents who strongly self-identified as being Muslim in terms of their identity did not necessarily correlate with those who scored highly using the scale of religious centrality. As a result of his findings, Huber emphasised the importance of differentiating between the centrality of religiosity and the concept of religious identity, stressing how 'neither concept should be confused'.

This distinction is worth highlighting in order to demonstrate the position described by many of the respondents in this study. Religiosity featured among participants both in terms of belief and in relation to religious practice. However, the concept of religious identity was not salient in terms of providing a source for mobilisation, as the following interviewee states:

I think with the Kurds, we don't have an issue with religion, and it's always for the Kurds an issue with ethnicity rather than religion. Religion, never with religion, despite we are Muslims. We gather on one point – the issue of nationality.

Religious organisations such as the local mosques were not described as an important source of support in terms of accessing information about social services or jobs by the interviewees. Several participants stated that they did not regularly attend a mosque and preferred to pray

at home. As one male participant explained, 'we are Muslim, we pray, there is the Qur'an (points to the Qur'an on the mantel piece); we pray but we don't go to the mosque'. Another participant described how he and his friends preferred to stay away from the mosque because he believed they were often judged for not being practising enough by other Muslims:

They think we disrespect religion, they think we say we're Muslim but we don't act like Muslims, so they don't like that. They see a lot of them [Kurds] as too free and disrespectful, because they think we are drinking or something like that.

In part, this was explained by the Kurdish community under study being dominated by young single men who, away from their families in Kurdistan, are no longer faced with constraints and expectations to comply with a religio-cultural behaviour framework, and have the freedom to explore behaviours frowned upon at home, such as drinking alcohol. This may lead to the more established Muslim communities viewing them with a level of disapproval, which may then act as a deterrent from regularly attending local mosques. However, there were some clear exceptions to this, as one participant stated: 'No, they [Kurds] do go to the mosque, some do go for Juma [Friday prayers] and during Ramadan and they pray five times a day.'

There were three Kurdish-led organisations within the community that provided important sources of information and advice on social services and advocacy. They also established a weekly language school for children to learn Kurdish and organised numerous social events, particularly around significant Kurdish celebrations such as *Newroz*, the Kurdish New Year. The organisations also played a key part in encouraging collective mobilisation. During the Iraqi elections, Kurdish community organisations arranged for all Kurdish residents to be transported to the closest city in which they were able to vote remotely in the elections.

In addition to community organisations, the Kurds in the area had successfully begun to develop what can be referred to as an ethnic enclave (Peach, 2002), with numerous businesses, including restaurants, takeaways, clothing shops, grocers, and a car wash. Ethnic enclaves can provide important hubs for communities to source employment, information, and services (Clark and Drinkwater, 2000).

The majority of the Kurds interviewed had social networks outside the town. All participants reported having friends, family members, and even former neighbours living elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Respondents remained in regular contact with these networks and visits were commonplace. During discussions, it became apparent that the concept of community extended beyond the physical locality. For most of the respondents, community was not seen to be limited by geographical proximity to members of their networks.

Numerous statements were made about Kurdish solidarity and brotherhood. When Kurds from Turkey, Syria or Iran passed through the area (or settled temporarily), the Kurds from Iraq offered them advice and friendship. One participant described how he met and befriended a Kurd from Turkey, despite difficulty in communicating across dialect barriers. The handful of Kurds from Turkey who were in the area regularly attended the community centre activities. Living in Britain provided the first opportunity for the majority of Kurds from Iraq to interact with Kurds from other nation-states. This was discussed by Griffiths (2000: 282) of Kurdish community organisations in London. Although he does not do so in reference to religious identity, what is described certainly fits with the premise presented in

this article, as he writes: ‘The Kurds continue in the quest for national recognition, divided as they are between the competing powers of Turkish, Arab and Persian nationalisms.’

To summarise, the interviews demonstrated how Kurdish ethno-national identity was more salient at both an individual level and for collective organisation among the participants in this study. In the remainder of this section, I shall discuss how processes described by participants, in relation to interaction with other communities and societal structures, have influenced the prominence of Kurdish identity expressed throughout the interviews.

Sharing an identity with the “other”

Pattison and Tavsanoglu (2002) and Romano (2002) argue that when Kurds leave their nation-states behind, they often seek to establish themselves as a group in their own right by distinguishing themselves from the majority populations of their sending countries. There is evidence of such differentiation expressed by several participants and the ethnic majority groups in the countries they left behind. One interviewee states:

It’s always the Kurds in the revolutions; it’s always fighting for recognition and identity. When you don’t belong to a country, you don’t feel like you have anything. Kurds are different from all the other nationals who live in the areas [countries] in terms of traditions, the way we clothe, the way we speak, what we eat, the way we dance.

Distinguishing oneself in this way not only assists with ethnic boundary maintenance but also provides an identity around which groups can mobilise. As Romano (2002: 127) writes, ‘persecution based on ethnic identity justified mobilisation and politicisation of ethnicity, in order to defend oneself and one’s group’. What Romano describes here is the process of ‘othering’ in response to being ‘othered’.

Othering is described as a way of asserting a positive identity about one’s own group by stigmatising the out-group. To identify a group as other emphasises differences often viewed as incompatible with the values of the in-group. To be othered often facilitates inequality, particularly where there is an imbalance of power between groups (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998). A Kurdish woman from Iran describes how she believes Kurds were othered by ethnic Persians in Iran:

With the Farsi people I spoke Farsi, with the Kurds I speak Kurdish. I lived in the capital, Tehran, but the Farsi don’t like the Kurdish people. They have an idea from the government that Kurdish people like to fight, they cause problems; the media and government give this opinion to the local people, that we are dangerous people, so how can we have a good relationship?

In a British setting, it has been argued that one explanation for the salience of religious identity among Muslims is a response to being othered within the discourse of Muslims in the West. However, the other for Kurds in their countries of departure are fellow Muslims and, therefore, for the purposes of group mobilisation, religious identity – an identity shared with the other – becomes less effective.

Historically, however, Islam featured as a means of social and political organisation as a response to Kurdish oppression. Atacan (2001) describes Kurdish Islamic-orientated movements such as the Med-Zehra, who positioned themselves in response to subjection by

what they believed was secular Turkish imperialism. Med-Zehra called for an Islamic federation, which allowed ethnic and linguistic differences to flourish, in keeping with the teachings from the Qur'an, which states that God created different tribes so that they may know each other, not so that one should dominate the other. In this view, those who were on the side of religion stood for the equality of all nations. In contrast, those who promoted oppression based on ethnic chauvinism were removed from the teachings of Islam. However, there has been a clear shift away from the use of religion as a form of political mobilisation since the inception of the modern states, and particularly since socialist Kurdish groups became the core source of activism.

Sarigil (2010) discusses how the promotion of what he calls a 'pro-Islamic approach' that emphasises Muslim solidarity, described here as the Ummah affect, has been suggested by conservatives as a means for dampening Kurdish ethno-nationalism. This approach is criticised for attempting to manipulate Kurds to subscribe to a 'higher' (religious) identity and in turn stifle Kurdish ethno-nationalism (Houston, 1999, in Sarigil, 2010). Gurses (2015) discusses how, within Turkey, the promotion of 'Islamic brotherhood' was used as a vehicle for increasing peace between Turkish and Kurdish populations. However, during his interviews with Kurdish respondents, they revealed a distrust of what was viewed as a deliberate use of Islam to promote Turkish culture and Kemalist-inspired political agendas.

As described above, employing religion as a vehicle for mobilisation is a complex matter for Kurds who share a Muslim identity with those they seek to distinguish themselves from in order to gain self-determination. If a salient religious identity results in deemphasising the ethnic identity, as described by the Ummah affect, it may have implications for Kurdish social mobilisation and political organisation.

Period of settlement in non-Muslim lands

There is a substantial body of literature that explores the impact of identity construction and a greater sense of ethnic belonging among communities who leave their homelands (Ballard, 1996; Modood, 2003). Identity theorists have described how, as a result of migrating to a new land, membership in an ethnic group can provide support in the way of social solidarity (Nagel, 1994; Cornell and Hartmann, 1998; Morawska, 2018). Gündüz-Hoşgör and Smits' (2002) study of migrants from Kurdish rural areas to urban centres demonstrated an increase in Kurdish migrants' need for an ethnic identity. This resulted in a greater awareness of their Kurdishness than in their home villages, where the previously-taken-for-granted 'normal' identity is transformed into a means for self-definition among a myriad of different ethnic groups. In addition, it provides a vehicle to connect with others in a hostile and unfamiliar setting. In this view, becoming a minority within a new society can heighten specific identities by increasing their relevance for self-definition and support through group belonging.

Continued interest in political developments among the Kurdish diaspora was described as a significant feature of Kurdishness by participants in this study, echoing earlier studies:

I think politics influences every single Kurdish person's life, because when you put on the news whenever there is something about the Kurdish situation it is uncertainty or some difficulty, so whether you would want to or not you will hear about the Kurdish situation and it will affect you.

Whoever is Kurdish, who calls themselves Kurds would have links or are influenced by politics. Myself I am interested in it and follow the politics because I want to see an independent Kurdish state one day and I think that is everyone's position. It's only the Kurds who don't have a state of their own. It is very important for every single Kurd to know what is going on in this respect.

Several studies on Kurdish migrants demonstrate a continued commitment towards a Kurdish identity motivated by interest in the politics of the homeland (Eccarius-Kelly, 2001; Fawcett, 2001). In this view, migration does not necessarily decrease interest, involvement, and investment in the country left behind. In relation to political activity, even the earliest Kurdish migrants to Europe promoted the issue of the self-determination of Kurds in their sending countries using their new European platform (Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray, 2006; Wahlbeck, 2019). Studies on Kurdish diaspora organisations such as those by Wahlbeck (1999), Griffiths (2000), and Baser (2013) describe strong community networks which provide services and support that are not always present among other refugee communities. For example, Griffiths' study of Somalis and Kurds in London found that Kurdish refugees from Turkey have been able to create viable formal organisations, while in comparison the Somali refugee community remains largely fragmented without strong organisation. He explains this as being a result of Kurdish desire for self-determination, which acts as a collective bond between members of the group.

Focusing on developments in the homeland can impact the way the diaspora view themselves in relation to their now host country. Wahlbeck (1999: 5) writes: 'Because of the continuing relationship which most [Kurdish] refugees have to their countries of origin, they wanted to think of themselves within this framework and not within the framework of British ethnic relations.' In this view, the perceived relevance of ethnic relations within the new host setting becomes less important when attention is fixed upon the sending country and global diaspora. The statement below demonstrates how, for some Kurds, tensions regarding the other remained even after several years on British soil:

The difficulties we faced in those states still has an impact here. So, for example, I am Kurdish, if I see a GP's practice and the doctor is Iraqi Arab and the other doctor is from Pakistan for example, I would prefer to go to the Pakistani than the Iraqi Arab because the way we look at people, we aren't racist, but because we've been persecuted by these countries we don't have very good relations with them.

Not all participants described such views. Several interviewees worked with Arabs from Iraq and felt such hostility was counter-productive in a British context, where the power relations no longer remained. However, other studies, namely Baser's (2013) work, describe how the Kurdish community in Sweden established their own mosques as well as community organisations, which illustrates a desire to maintain a level of separation from other Muslim communities. She describes how participants discussed a need to remain autonomous as a means for ensuring protection against persecution and perceived prejudice within the new setting.

Ethnic identities are not static but are developed and influenced by their environment, and this is particularly the case for migrant diaspora communities, who redefine meaning and boundaries from generation to generation (Nagel, 1994). As discussed, migrating to a new land can result in ethnic identities becoming more prominent and ethnic groups more bonded.

However, a very different consequence of migration for ethnic identities is acculturation. Residing in the UK will inevitably provide opportunity for contact with other groups and the potential for inter-group relationships to form. Marriage is a particularly useful indicator of the strength of group boundaries and identity maintenance (Merton, 1941; Alba and Golden, 1986). Given that many Kurds from Iraq arrived in the town as single young men, there is evidence to suggest a high propensity for marriage with non-Kurdish women could occur.

Three respondents in the study described being married to non-Kurds. A fourth participant discussed how it was particularly difficult for many of the Kurdish migrants he knew – arriving as single asylum seekers – to find a compatible spouse. One interviewee stated:

There are people who get married with other communities as well. I have a friend in Bradford and he got married with a Pakistani girl; he was Sunni, she was Sunni, and they are successful and have a happy life. We give priority to Kurds; if not we will go to the next available, like the religious or culturally close and then it would go step by step like this.

One of the Kurdish women interviewed was married to an Iraqi Arab. She discussed how her marriage had not influenced her relationship with other Kurds in the local area. Her husband also reported an amicable relationship with the town's Kurds, although he did not attend many Kurdish organised events. His wife, however, was actively involved in the community and taught at the Kurdish language school. Another participant married to a white British woman described how he was very clear before the marriage that his spouse would have to learn the ways of his culture if they were to wed. He described how she had adopted many Kurdish traditions during their marriage and had learnt to speak Kurdish, the main language spoken in their home.

Although only three participants in the study had married outside of their Kurdish communities, they did not believe that doing so had resulted in a less salient Kurdish identity when compared with other Kurds. Despite this, boundary maintenance theory would suggest that individuals from bonded ethnic groups with prominent ethnic identities would be less inclined to marry out-groupers. Nagel (1999: 154) discusses this seemingly 'simultaneous decrease and increase' in ethnic relevance as being part of the process of redefining ethnic boundaries based on environmental challenges, which is a reflection of ethnicity as a social construct, rather than a feature cemented by a common variable. In this view, marrying out-groupers was not a reflection of a less relevant Kurdish identity, but a response to circumstances at the time. The quotes and discussions above demonstrate how actors negotiate the continuing prominence of their ethnic identity, whether seeking someone who is 'culturally close' or asserting the use of their mother tongue.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore religious and ethnic identities among a recent Kurdish migrant community in a small northern town in England with existent, established Muslim minority communities of different ethnic origins. Findings from this study highlight how the salience of ethnic identity was influenced by ethnic repression faced by Kurds in the states they had left behind, leading to a greater politicisation of ethnicity, rather than religious identity, as noted to be the case among Muslim communities in the West.

However, there were also other key considerations that had contributed to the establishment of a confident and politically active Kurdish community within this small town. The vibrancy of Kurdish nationalist movements (Aziz, 2011; Demir, 2017), and their long-established presence within the diaspora (Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray, 2006; Baser 2018), meant that relatively newer migrants were able to make use of existent political and social organisations. The respondents in this study discussed tapping into networks that spanned the country and, as such, were able to draw upon resources outside of the town itself. This contributed to creating a significant space for ethno-national identity construction. For example, the bussing of Kurdish migrants to another city so that they were able to vote in the elections of their sending states was part of wider political activities taking place across the diaspora.

Although the majority of the Kurdish participants felt that religion was important, they did not subscribe to an umbrella religious identity for group mobilisation, as discussed by Adamson (2011). Instead, the research supports the findings of other studies on the Kurds (Bobrow, 1996; Romano, 2002; Rouen, 2015; Walhbeck, 2019), which also discuss how the impact of ethnic repression results in greater politicisation of ethnicity, although they do not explore this in relation to religious identity. A key consideration discussed by participants regarding the adoption of a unified Muslim identity is that, in the Kurdish case, their perceived oppressors were also Muslims, even if no contradiction was seen between being Muslim by faith and the salience of a Kurdish ethnic identity among the respondents. Arabs in Iraq, for example, were viewed as the other by many participants when discussing how experience prior to migration impacted on group mobilisation.

As stated, Kurds are heterogeneous in terms of the religious sects they belong to (Pew Research Centre, 2012; Jenkins, et al., 2018), the nation-states they migrate from (Baser, 2018), and their political affiliations (Griffiths, 2000). Thus, while findings on identity salience generated within the interviews do not allow us to draw conclusions for all Kurdish migrants, they do remind us that the dominant discourse on religious identity is more complex than is often presented, particularly within academic discourse on Muslims in Europe. The findings also clearly support earlier studies, which acknowledge a myriad of political organisation among the Kurdish diaspora, yet still conclude that the pursuit of national recognition remains paramount across the Kurdish political spectrum in European settings (Griffiths, 2000; Baser, 2013).

Although the locale for this study differed in many respects from previous research on Kurds in Britain, such as that by Wahlbeck (1999) and Griffiths (2000), whose fieldwork was done in London with the majority of Kurdish participants originating from Turkey, within the local context discussed in this article, the salience of an ethnic identity among respondents remained, despite overseas migration. Furthermore, there was no apparent evidence of the importance attached to a Kurdish ethnic identity being downplayed or replaced in order to close ranks with other Muslim minorities in the town. On the contrary, the Kurds had a strong sense of community and were part of social structures which spanned the length and breadth of the country. As such, being settled as refugees in this small-city context did not appear to affect the availability of Kurdish political spaces, which supported the maintenance of ethnic identity.

It should be noted that the period of settlement of migrant communities has an important bearing on identity formation and salience. In the case of the community under study, it is worth remaining mindful that within a British setting, first-generation Muslim migrants have

been reported to identify more strongly with ethnic and national identities (Adamson 2011). However, Baser (2011) found that second- and subsequent-generation Kurds, or, as she refers to them, 'Euro-Kurds', were more likely to report a salient Kurdish identity if their parents were politically active. Stories of persecution in the homeland were discussed as important reminders for the need to maintain a sense of Kurdishness, even when young people had never visited their parents' countries of origin. Therefore, as this study explored identity salience among recent migrants (less than ten years), it is important to acknowledge that the meaning placed on both levels of religiosity and religious identity may shift among subsequent generations as a result of prioritising other forms of group recognition within a British setting.

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WOMEN OF KURDISTAN: A Historical and Bibliographic Study

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