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Oil, Faith, and Uncertainty

Students' Experiences of Economy, War, and Islam in Slemani

Social Anthropology

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This master's thesis inquires how rapid economic transformations and fractures intersect with alterations in personal religious sentiments among university students in Slemani, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The answers to the research question are sought by tracing Kurdistan Region's recent history and contemporary social reality in connection with transformations in the global economic system, especially in the context of the today's international 'War on Terror'. At the same time, the thesis will emphasise an ethnographic approach which begins with the students' own experiences and interpretations.

The research data has been accumulated during fieldwork carried out in spring and autumn of 2014. In addition to fieldnotes and participant observation, it is comprised of semi-structured group interviews that took place in five different campuses around Slemani and its surroundings. Theoretically the research follows a tradition of anthropological research on Islam which examines religion as an internal social force rather than an external social structure and emphasises both individual experience and contextuality but the thesis also seeks to historicise and analyse wider societal changes through world-system theory.

In the oil-rich autonomous Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq, the students represent the first generation to have been born and brought up almost entirely during the time of self-rule, which began to develop with the establishment of the No-Fly zone in 1991. Societal transformation in Kurdistan especially over the past two decades has been extremely rapid. At the same time, while the region has stabilised, prospered, and reintegrated into the global world-economy, students and youth in general have felt increasingly disgruntled and betrayed by unfulfilled political promises. The social role and visibility of Islam on campuses have likewise grown.

This thesis posits that the intensification of religiosity and the growing support for modern and transnational conservative religious movements is connected with the improved access to various communication technologies such as the internet. Kurdistan's Islam has traditionally been very heterodox and syncretic but, in parallel to the rest of the Middle-East, the acts of negotiating, challenging, and reproducing religious traditions and interpretations has become even more polyphonic. However, this development has to be understood against the background of growing inequality, widening generational gaps, societal instability, the past and present threats of violence, and the geopolitical conditions of the entire region. This complex social reality is analysed as 'uncertainty', as a state where conflict or the possibility of conflict is not an anomaly or a rupture of everyday routines but instead societal emergency is the natural condition of ordinary life itself.

TAMPEREEN YLIOPISTO
Yhteiskunta- ja kulttuuritieteiden yksikkö

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Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma kysyy, miten nopeat taloudellis-yhteiskunnalliset murrokset ja henkilökohtaisen uskontosuhteen muutokset risteävät ja kytkeytyvät toisiinsa suleimanialaisten yliopisto-opiskelijoiden elämässä Irakin Kurdistanissa. Vastauksia tutkimuskysymykseen etsitään kartoittamalla Kurdistanin lähihistoriaa ja nykypäivän yhteiskunnallista todellisuutta sekä hahmottamalla niiden yhteyksiä laajempiin globaalin talousjärjestelmän muutoksiin erityisesti nykypäivän kansainvälisen “terrorismin vastaisen sodan” kontekstissa. Samalla tutkielma kuitenkin korostaa opiskelijoiden omista kokemuksista ja tulkinnoista lähtevää etnografista tutkimusotetta.

Tutkimusaineisto perustuu etnografiseen kenttätyöhön kevään ja syksyn 2014 ajalta. Aineiston keräämisen menetelmänä on käytetty osallistuvan havainnoinnin ja kenttäpäiväkirjojen lisäksi puolistrukturoituja ryhmähaastatteluja, jotka toteutettiin viidellä eri kampuksella Suleimaniassa ja sen lähiympäristössä. Teoreettisesti tutkielma pohjaa kontekstoivaan ja kokemusta korostavaan islamin antropologisen tutkimuksen perinteeseen, joka tarkastelee uskontoa yhteiskunnallisena voimana ulkopuolisten rakenteiden sijasta. Samalla tutkielma kuitenkin pyrkii samanaikaisesti maailmanjärjestelmäteorian kautta laajempien yhteiskunnallisten muutosten historiallistamiseen ja analyysiin.

Opiskelijat edustavat Irakin pohjoisosassa sijaitsevan öljyrikkaan Kurdistanin itsehallintoalueen ensimmäistä sukupolvea, joka on syntynyt ja varttunut lähes kokonaan vuoden 1991 lentokieltovyöhykkeen perustamisesta alkaneen autonomiakehityksen aikakaudella. Yhteiskunnallinen muutos Kurdistanissa on erityisesti kahden viime vuosikymmenen aikana ollut äärimmäisen nopeaa. Mutta samalla kun alue on vakautunut, vaurastunut ja integroitunut uudelleen osaksi globaalia maailmantaloutta, opiskelijoiden ja nuorison tyytymättömyys sekä kokemukset lunastamattomista poliittisista lupauksista ovat lisääntyneet. Islaminuskon yhteiskunnallinen merkitys ja näkyvyys kampuksilla on niin ikään kasvanut.

Tässä tutkielmassa esitetään, että uskonnollisuuden syvenemiseen ja modernien ylirajaisten konservatiivisten islamilaisten liikkeiden kannatuksen kasvuun liittyy merkittävästi erilaisten viestintäteknologioiden, kuten internetin, käytön helpottuminen. Kurdistanissa islaminusko on ollut jo perinteisesti hyvin heterodoksista ja synkretististä, mutta muun Lähi-idän tapaan sielläkin uskonnollisten perinteiden ja tulkintojen neuvotteleminen, haastaminen ja reproduktio ovat entisestään moniäänistyneet. Taustalla kuitenkin vaikuttaa ennen kaikkea kasvava eriarvoisuus, kuilut sukupolvien välillä, yhteiskunnallinen epävakaus, niin menneiden vuosikymmenten kuin nykypäivänkin väkivallan uhkakuvat sekä koko Lähi-idän geopoliittiset olosuhteet. Tätä sosiaalista todellisuutta tarkastellaan tutkielmassa analyyttisesti epävarmuutena, tilana, jossa konflikti tai konfliktin mahdollisuus ei ole poikkeus tai repeämä tavallisessa arjessa, vaan jokapäiväinen elämä itse on jatkuva yhteiskunnallinen hätätila.

Table of Contents

Glossary

Asayish: The security service and gendarmerie organisation of KRG.

Ba'ath: The Iraqi branch of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. A nationalist and higly centralist party which ruled Iraq until 2003. Former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was the party's head from 1979 onwards.

Daesh: The local name for Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), derived from Arabic.

Gorran: 'The Change' Movement, a new political party which split from the PUK in late 2000s. It pushed PUK aside in regional elections in the autumn of 2013.

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party, the leading political party in the region. KDP dominates provinces of Hawler and Duhok.

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government, the government of the region.

Peshmerga: 'Those who face [towards] death'. Traditionally the Kurdistan Front's armed guerilla wing in the struggle against Saddam Hussein's regime, but it became the recognised formal armed forces of the KRG after 2003.

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. A political party which split from KDP in the mid-1970s. The party is projecting a more left-of-centre and urban image than its rival KDP. Its traditional stronghold is the Slemani governorate.

Picture 1: Mountains outside Slemani.
(Photograph by Ville Laakkonen)

1. Introduction: Oil, faith, and uncertainty

> 'How is it possible that your Swedish isn't any better, you're Finnish after all?' Asks the man sitting next to me and laughs. He is a Kurd from Stockholm. As we have been waiting for the boarding to begin at the Istanbul Atatürk Airport, he has been giving me advice for my stay in Slemani. The man is one of the dozens of Kurds, from countries like Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Sweden or Turkey, flying to Slemani governorate to visit their relatives or coming back home after a business trip. What has struck me as unreal is that none of this, a direct flight to Slemani on a passenger plane operated by one of the major airlines in Europe, would have been possible only some ten years ago.
>
> Hours later it is past 4 am and I have finally arrive at my friend's home in a middle class residence complex of towering blocks of spacious flats. The car park is a maze of massive shining Chevrolets, Land Rovers, and Toyotas. Noticing my bewilderment as I am looking around me, my friend remarks 'and still, people are not happy.'

How rapid economic change and alterations in religious sentiments intersect? This, in the context of students' lives in Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq, is the question my research seeks to address. On the one hand, it stems from the unease created by many popular discourses which address religion, especially Islam, in both meanings as faith and as an institution, as separate from the social, historical and economic context in which it is instantiated. On the other hand, it is also motivated by the curious realisation that, apart from few sub-disciplines and research traditions among humanities and social sciences, the role of Islam in Kurdistan is routinely downplayed.

Kurdistan Region, once the northern periphery of the republic of Iraq, has been gaining wider international recognition since the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. In the aftermath of the Gulf War of 1991, the peoples of the region, the majority of which are ethno-linguistically defined as Kurds, were granted de facto autonomy to govern their society[1]. In the post-Saddam Hussein era, as large parts of Iraq have succumbed to a political breakdown and a brutal civil war, the Kurdish authorities have managed to partially insulate their enclave and carry on reconstructing the local institutions and infrastructure ravaged by decades of violent conflict and poverty.

[1] Nevertheless, this autonomy was not formally recognised until more than a decade later.

In the Global North the resilience of Kurds in Iraq and their Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been admired (e.g. Hitchens 2007) and the region's economic growth advertised (e.g. Morris May 4, 2013). In short, the erstwhile rugged mountain guerrillas of the old European imaginary have been transformed into a global political and economic success story. This has been the official discourse of Kurdish authorities too. For example, the Kurdish veteran politician Jalal Talabani, who served as the president of Iraq until 2014, gratefully addressed the 'people of America' in 2006 and proclaimed that the city of Slemani in Kurdistan now had over 2 000 millionaires, while prior to the invasion of 2003 there were only 12 (Kurd Net September 19, 2006). But over the course of the 2000s and 2010s other kinds of voices have emerged too, for instance accusations of corruption, strongly centralist institutions, lack of tolerance towards dissent, and failures to redress growing inequality. These questions have also been addressed by few scholars: a research in 2012 identified the problems of inequality as (I) inherited, (II) due to corruption, (III) pertaining to the nature of the labour market, and (IV) residing between urban and rural areas of the region (Noori 2012).

The two contrasting social realities, two stories abou Kurdistan Region, are equally visible in relation to religiously framed insurgency. One would be hard pressed to find a note on Kurdistan in Gilles Kepel's massive *Jihad: The trail of political Islam* (2006), yet, hundreds of youths have been recruited by their fellow Kurds to join the civil war in Syria (Coles February 4, 2014; Salih August 3, 2014). Islamist[2] parties, even if often marginal, are visible in the public sphere. While the KRG proclaims its openness to diversity, members of older urban generation, not worried about terrorism but rather concerned with conservatism, lament that skirts have disappeared from the university campuses and that male and female students do not hang out together any longer.

Kurdistan Region is at the same time both progressive and devoted to tradition, multicultural and nationalistic, peaceful and locked in combat, sovereign and intensely dependent on external benevolence, growing in political importance and sidelined in global lobbies. These contradictions and contrasting realities, and the problems of their noticeably ahistorical and decontextualised portrayal in popular discourses, lie at the very core of my inquiry.

[2] I use 'Islamism' to refer to ideologies which seek to establish a society where political and legislative institutions are derived from Islamic law and doctrine.

1.1 Slemani

"Can you imagine it could be anything like this anywhere in Europe?"

A Kurdish man, walking through the sea of hundreds of party flags

Slemani[3] is the capital city of the Kurdish governorate by the same name. It lies in a mountainous region bordered by Iran in the East and the Diyala governorate in the south. Traditionally described as the home of Sorani Kurdish arts and culture, the city, once besieged by the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad like the rest of the Kurdistan Region, has witnessed steady growth in security and foreign investments, and a massive construction boom. Five-star spa hotels, shopping centres, towering office buildings, and restaurants with international menus dominate the new city centre. But this core of the city is lined with a periphery of half-finished, doomed building projects, crumbling old alleyways, and roads that have been waiting to be paved with asphalt for decades. The same is true for people. Some have prospered in security their grandparents could never have imagined while others are struggling with poverty. While transnational[4] entrepreneurs and the local economic elites import guest workers from Nepal and Ethiopia, civil servants drive taxis outside office hours to make ends meet, and ordinary working-class neighbourhoods are confronted with unemployment.

It is these contradictory social realities that I set out to examine. I was encouraged to go to Slemani instead of the capital Hewler because in "Suli" I would still be able to encounter "authentic" Kurdish culture, and fare a lot better with my limited budget. My choice to focus on students was based on two considerations: (I) it gave me a chance to delineate a specific (if internally heterogeneous) social grouping to work with, and (II) students occupy a very particular position 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1969, p. 95) adulthood and childhood, and they were the future generation of which much was expected in the globalising Kurdish society. All in all, I spent a little over four weeks in the city during the year 2014, some two in spring from late March to mid-April and another two in autumn from late September to mid-October. In hindsight it is easy to establish I was ethnographically speaking immensely lucky in that my fieldwork was carried out during times which were very dramatic and intense.

[3] Also transliterated for example as Sulaymaniyah or Sulaimani. However, I have chosen to use the transliteration used by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Similarly, I use the Kurdish names, rather than their international equivalents often derived from Arabic, for the names of other geographical locations too.

[4] I use the term 'transnational' quite extensively in my thesis. Simply put, the term refers to various kinds of global connections which transcend nation-state borders. See for example Steven Vertovec (2001, 2009).

In spring the local politics were in virtual deadlock: the leading parties in Kurdistan Region had failed to form a government following the 2013 parliamentary elections. Former opposition party Gorran (Change) Movement had pushed the traditional PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) aside, but the latter would not cede its power. Additionally, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi central government in Baghdad had quarrelled for a long time over the distribution of revenues resulting from oil drilled in Kurdish areas and this had resulted in Baghdad withholding the KRG's share of the federal budget since early 2014. Just a couple of days after I had arrived the campaigns for municipal elections began, and the local political climate was overheating. The whole city was decorated with party banners and election posters, after office hours men would get together and drive around the city centre waving party flags and honking car horns well into the night, and local media was filled with political talk shows and propaganda.

In autumn the economic situation that had gradually weakened before had become considerably worsened. Early in the summer ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham[5]), notorious for its brutality in Syria, had begun an onslaught through northern and western Iraq. As the combatants of ISIS, with the help of former Ba'athists and dissident Sunni factions alienated by Baghdad's Shi'ite leadership[6], ravaged through large swathes of land, they had ultimately reached within less than 50 kilometres from the Kurdish capital Hewler. While the initial attack had been successfully repelled (with the help of US airstrikes), war was putting an increasingly heavy burden economically and socially on the Kurdish population. The KRG–Baghdad friction over oil revenues also continued to be unresolved[7]. The Gorran Movement had risen in power in Slemani, beating Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in the elections, but virtually nothing had changed on the ground level. In between late 2013 and autumn of 2014 the capital Hewler had seen two car explosions, first of its kind in years. Security measures were tight. While Slemani, far removed from the actual battlefields, continued to be safe, fear and uncertainty were tangible.

[5] Generally, the name ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) is also used. In 2014, ISIS also proclaimed an Islamic caliphate on the lands it controlled at the time and changed its name to Islamic State (IS).

[6] See Rudaw interview with Exeter professor and a former Iraq advisor of the United Nations, Gareth Stansfield (Whitcomb June 29, 2014).

[7] The dispute was ultimately formally settled in late 2014, but as of January 2015 the parties involved continue to argue over details such as possible repayments.

1.2 Making sense of it all: methodology

> 'An Ethnographer who sets out to study only religion, or only technology, or only social organisation cuts out an artificial field for inquiry, and he will be seriously handicapped in his work.'[8]

First and foremost, my research is an ethnographic study. Strictly methodologically speaking, it is an attempt to systematically learn from my subjects by engaging with their everyday life. It is an experience-based inquiry into meanings, practices, and memories. Roger Sanjek (1996) has formulated a textbook example of the research process. His triangle of anthropological inquiry has three components: ethnography, contextualisation and comparison. Ethnography means the long-term involvement in the everyday life of the anthropologist's interlocutors through participatory fieldwork. Contextualisation, then, is the process of mapping out the historical and socio-cultural particularities of the subject of study – what sets it apart from other locations and contexts. Finally, comparison works on two basic levels, comparison with other social, economic and cultural contexts and comparison with the research literature on the same subject or context. Actual work, the way I see it, is a continuous alteration between these three points of the triangle where the movement goes back and forth in every direction. In short, what anthropology as a field of social science and ethnography as a method of data gathering have to offer is an insight more rigorous, intimate and personal, and thus revealing something that structured interviews, discourse analysis or archival research alone often do not.

As Laura Nader (2011) has argued, ethnography is not the description of socio-cultural realities, but a theory of how to describe them. My particular theory of how to describe the social realities of students in Slemani is that I am trying to historicise the practices, meanings, and phenomena of the 'ethnographically visible' (Farmer 2004), and ultimately to go beyond it for a richer understanding. It is a theory informed by Eric R. Wolf's magnum opus *Europe and the People without History* (1982), but also draws on his characterisation of four modes of power (1990). According to Wolf the fourth mode, structural power, is the 'power that not only operates within settings or domains but that also organises and orchestrates the settings themselves' (ibid. p. 5). This structural power is in essence the global relations of production and trade, and it directs my research to ask how contemporary economic reality in Kurdistan Region, with its oil flows and foreign investments, is affecting the practices of everyday life? Following from that question, my ethnography seeks to

[8] Bronislaw Malinowski (1978, p. 9)

trace how the global world-economy and its structuring power are interrelated with religious practices in this one particular locality?

To achieve this research aim, my thesis is structurally divided into analytical themes which from the outset may seem conceptually very far from each other, but nonetheless flow back and forth as I am tracing the primary analytical thread, economic change and religious sentiments, across the historical trajectories, experiences of violence, and economic realities which have shaped (and continue to shape) the students' life-worlds. Each chapter of this thesis forms a building block towards answering the initial question. Chapter 2 explicates the theoretical grounds of my study and begins by outlining my theoretical approach to Islam and Muslim experiences. From there on I will elaborate on how I am proposing to make sense of the global economic system which connects Kurdistan Region with any other state, society, or culture around the world. Chapter 3 is dedicated to analysing the history of Kurdistan Region, its relation to states and state-crafting, as well as global economy and warfare. There I seek to lay the groundwork for addressing how biographies marked by violence configure a very particular present. Chapter 4 gradually moves from history to the present and is motivated by a quest to understand how the global is embedded in the local. It seeks to present the contemporary reality of Slemani and the surrounding region. By looking at the continuous sense of emergency, the 'chronicity' (Vigh 2008) of crisis, and its world-economic and religious implications, I try to dissect the ethnographically visible in which the students I have worked with study, make plans, and give meaning to their experiences. Chapters 5 and 6 seek to convey and analyse these meanings, especially so in relation to the triple-meaning of religion: as faith, practices, and institutions.

1.3 The difficulties and possibilities of putting it all together

> '[v]iolence is not somewhere else—in a third world country, on a distant battlefield, or in a secret interrogation center—but … it is an inescapable fact of life for every country, nation, and person, whether or not they are personally touched by direct violence.' [9]

Weaving together large questions is obviously a delicate task. I will be using a number of concepts which may have a number of definitions, or their definitions are at times contested. Most of them I am hoping to clarify in Chapter 2, but a few words on those I do not explicitly elaborate on are in order. As I will point out later, and this is something that is discernible from Wolf (1982) but also

[9] Carolyn Nordstrom & Antonius C.G.M. Robben (1995, p. 2).

manifest in the works of many scholars I am making a reference to, is that globalisation is hardly a new process. However, the kind of globalisation I am thinking about here is a very much intensified stage of what may have begun centuries ago. Yet, I do not have the possibility within the scope of this research to trace all the transnational interconnections, spatial qualities attributed to states (e.g. Ferguson & Gupta 2002), borders, or the experiences of belonging that there is to analyse[10]. Instead, for the purposes of my research this process, or rather these intertwined processes, are connected with a very particular global legislative and institutional ideology commonly referred to as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is often perceived as the process of expanding the administrative ideology of private capitalist businesses to other spheres of social life. For Loïc Wacquant (2012) neoliberalism is a political, not economic, project connoting a re-engineering of the state towards a disciplinary pole of the bureaucratic field (including a particular emphasis on legal and carceral systems). However, as Don Kalb (2012) points out, neoliberalism is not merely institutional phenomenon. Rather it also has very concrete effects on a very tangible level of lived experience. These are effects the students I became acquainted with also perceive and debate.

My thesis is markedly different from a number of ethnographic works on Kurdistan Region (e.g. Barth 1953; Bruinessen 1992; King 2014) because it takes urban middle class as its focus. I would argue that the traditional rural focus risks painting an exoticised picture of "simple village life" when, in fact, Kurdistan has always also been a land of important urban centres. The region's Kurdish capital Hewler is most likely one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited settlements (Lawler 2014). Looking back at his *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (1992), Martin van Bruinessen notes that while it was true that he had 'looked for, and found, Kurdish nomads and peasants', most of his Kurdish friends 'were in fact neither nomads nor peasants but educated townsmen' (Bruinessen 2013, p. 2[11]). He also admits that 'I spent, in fact, a fair amount of time in towns and cities during my first two years of fieldwork in Kurdistan, but the urban dimension of Kurdish society remained under-analysed in my dissertation' (ibid.). It is noteworthy, however, that my acquaintances were consistent in their insistence of separating the urban Slemani from its rural surroundings, "the villages". The inhabitants of the latter, "the villagers", were considered by the urban middle class to be unlearned and conservative, especially in matters pertaining to religion and individual freedom. This position is indirectly analysed in Chapter 5 through discussions on both symbolic violence and social status.

[10] See for example Deborah A. Thomas & M. Kamari Clarke (2013) for a review of different approaches to contemporary globalisation.

[11] The entire article is an interesting analysis of the urban history of Kurdistan and Kurdish culture, but in order to stay within the scope of my research, I will leave the discussion here at Bruinessen's introductory remarks.

One particular problem I wish to address here is the danger of reifying or oversimplifying the multifaceted nature of Slemani and its students. Even if I write about Islam in a singular form, I do acknowledge how syncretic and varied the religious traditions are even in a single location such as Kurdistan Region. What I am trying to say about Muslims and Islam is that Islamic faith and religious institutions, rather than being an external mold in which a society would be cast, actually form discourses, traditions, and debates *within* the society. Another issue is that we are dealing here with very complex geographical and political reality where names, meanings, and concepts can easily become blurred. I have chosen to use the term Kurdistan Region which is short for Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Occasionally, I may refer to Kurdistan alone, but generally that word is used for the Greater Kurdistan[12] which is a historical and geographical area that is currently divided between four nation states, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Kurdistan is a very much politicised term, especially in Turkey where the state does not formally recognise that parts of such entity would reside within its borders. I have, however, also used the term Southern Kurdistan to refer to Kurdistan Region as the southern part of the Greater Kurdistan. I write about Kurds as a separate ethno-linguistic group, mainly because the Kurds themselves often do so, but I wish to underline that both Kurds as a nation and Kurdistan as a geographical area consists of several dialects, religious and ethnic identities, and political aspirations (see e.g. Kreyenbroek & Allison 1996; McDowall 2004). If my scope seems limited, it is simply because of the fact that if had tried to touch every aspect possible, the reader would not make it as far as to Chapter 6 until sometime in late 2020.

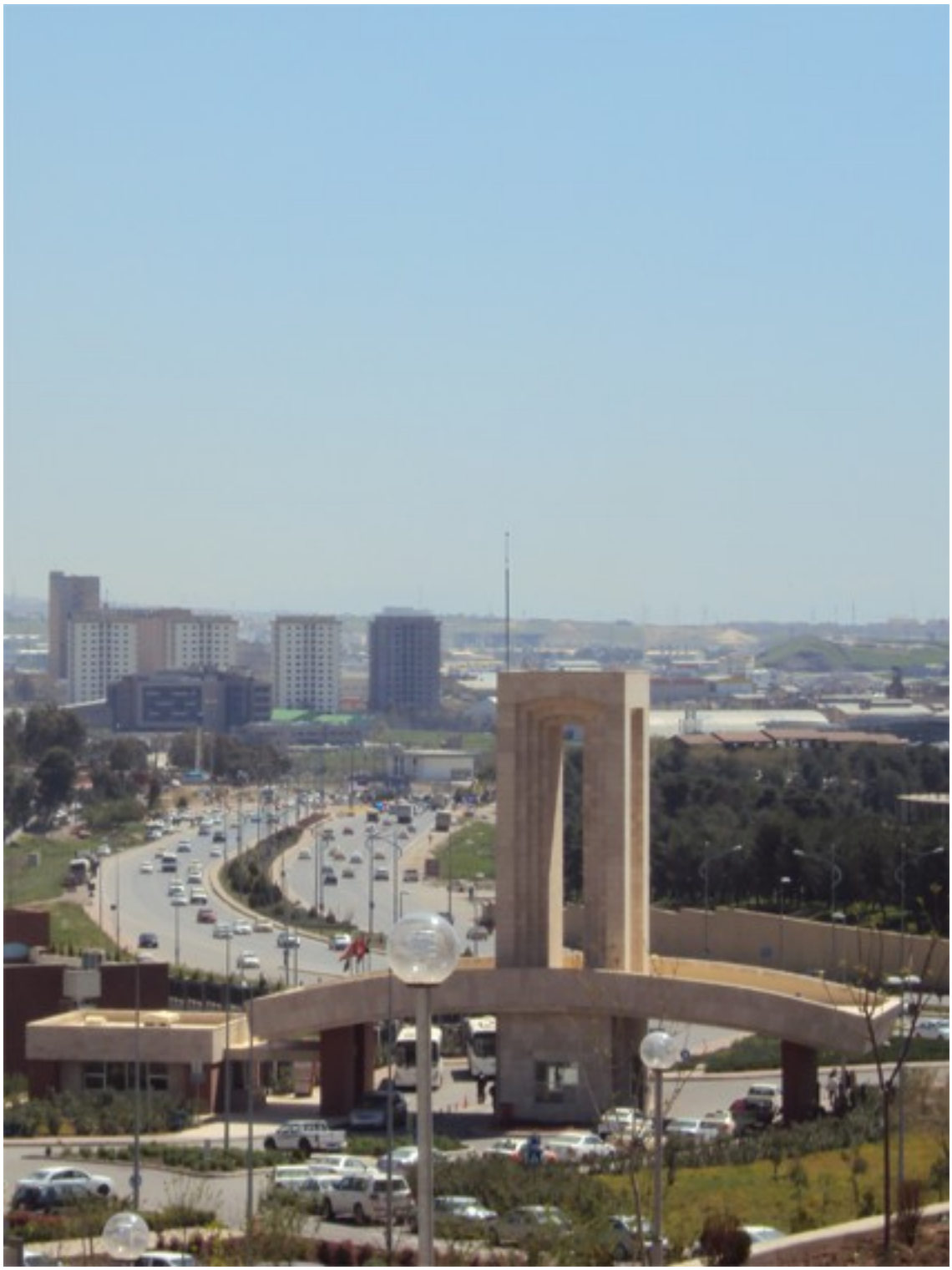
At the same time, there are obvious shortcomings in my methods and their analytical results. My ethnographic material is collected in following institutions: two private universities, the American University of Iraq Sulaimani (AUIS) and Komar University of Science and Technology (KUST), and three public institutions, the University of Slemani, University of Slemani College of Commerce, and Dukan Technical Institute. In addition to participant observation, I conducted semi-structured group interviews in all of these universities apart from AUIS. Moreover, I went on a *piazza*, that is, walked around the city's streets and parks, and sat at cafes and teashops with my interlocutors. In many of the group interviews and some of the more informal events only few of the students could speak English and my Sorani Kurdish is not good for pretty much anything else than getting a taxi. In these occasions the conversations quoted here have taken place with either the help of a pre-arranged translator or some of the participants doing the translation. Similarly, when I have spoken English with my acquaintances, their skill levels have been very varied. I have chosen to not

[12] Kurdistan translates as the 'Land of the Kurds'.

to transcribe those discussions and interviews word for word but instead, without altering the meanings[13] they convey, tried to do justice to what people have wanted to say. I have also chosen to anonymise all of my interlocutors, to protect them from possible repercussions or difficulties their participation in my study would cause.

Finally, there are a few sources of which I have made an extensive use in selected parts of my thesis. David McDowall's *Modern History of the Kurds* (2004) is simply by far the most extensive historical overview of the Kurds published in English. While there is a somewhat "accepted", canonical status for what I analyse here as Kurdish history, in order not to rely on a single source I constantly make reference to other sources which have recounted the same events. Diane E. King's *Kurdistan on the Global Stage. Kinship, Land, and Community in Iraq* (2014) is one of the rare, and definitely one of the most recent, contemporary ethnographic accounts of Kurdistan Region. The scope and the richness of material recounted in the book make it impossible to ignore it in any "lesser" ethnographic accounts such as mine. There are points where I disagree with King but I will, however, try to enter in a dialogue with her analysis in several chapters of my study.

[13] A number of expressions connoting particular viewpoints or political positions did appear regularly in the discussions I took part in. During my analysis, if I have not been sure about what meaning my interlocutor gives to certain words, I have established these viewpoints and positions by comparing different recordings, translations, and field notes I have had.



Picture 2: A view from the new campus of University of Slemani.
(Photograph by Ville Laakkonen)

2. Theory: on being Muslim in the world-economy

> 'My aim is not to persuade the reader to substitute a relativized and fragmented vision for one of global unity. Rather it is to situate some of these religious, cultural, and ideological forms and practices that people regard as Islamic in the life and development of their societies.'[14]

Despite the fact that Kurdish Islam is historically marked by a unique blend of local heterodoxy and syncretism (Bruinessen 1999a & 2000; Kreyenbroek 1996) and even though Kurds have once been labelled in the Middle East as Muslims only when "compared to the unbeliever" (Bruinessen 1999a, p. 2 & 2000, p. 15), and in spite of the recent ruthless aggressions shrouded in Islamic rhetoric thrown at them, hundreds of Kurdish youth have left to join Islamist factions in Iraq and Syria. During the last few years groups of middle class boys have grown thick beards as they reach adulthood and some urban girls all of a sudden don a headscarf as they start their sophomore year. These actions, which can be seen constitutive of a participation in the global Islamic movement centred on piety and reformation, have been locally met with disbelief and internationally largely ignored. Yet, it is altogether an interesting phenomenon and one, I will argue, that cannot be studied without taking into account both the regional history and the rapid economic change currently taking place in Kurdistan. This thesis asks how economic transformation in Kurdistan Region intersects with alterations in religious sentiments among students in higher education. The question is theoretically grounded on two different analytical standpoints, the anthropological study of Islam, and the word-systemic analysis of globalisation.

2.1 Muslims, not Islam

'Eid[15] is for Muslims. Daesh is not.'

A receptionist, in his early twenties

First of these standpoints, the anthropological understanding of religion, is itself a varied field of study. Religion, faith and morality are complex concepts themselves and could be looked at from a number of different angles. However, the point of view I am adopting is one that looks at being

[14] Michael Gilsenan (2000, p. 19).

[15] Eid refers to the Feast of Sacrifice (*Eid al-Adha* in Arabic, *Eid-e qorban* in Persian), celebrated by Muslims to honour Ibrahim's (Abraham in Christianity) willingness to sacrifice his own son as a proof of his submission to God.

Muslim as a lived experience (e.g. Marranci 2008). My approach is in many ways also informed by Talal Asad (e.g. 1983; 1993; 1996), who looks at the socially constructed formation of the "believer" or the "practitioner" and the reproduction of traditions, as well as the ways how Islam is appropriated in different social contexts. Thus, for the purposes of my thesis Islam is seen as historically layered, locally and temporally varied configuration of knowledge, practices and beliefs which not only facilitate social and political reform, but also work as ways to articulate and configure multiple meaningful subjectivities and processes of self-realisation. In other words, at the centre of the anthropological inquiry undertaken here is an individual embedded in a particular social context, which is one of Kurdistan's urban centres[16], not only making sense of the world or submitting to God and the words and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed to whom God spoke to, but actively interacting with and transforming this very same social context. Religion is folded into the ways people generally live their everyday life – work, engage in trade, enter marriage, take part in recreational activities, eat, drink, rejoice, mourn, and ultimately, depart from this world. Or, as Talal Asad has posited when discussing Christian worship and arguing against the prominence of symbolic analysis over social context: '[i]t is not simply 'worship' but social and economic institutions in general, within which individual biographies are lived out, that lend stable character to the flow of a Christian's activity and to the quality of his experience' (Asad 1983, p. 241). It has to be acknowledged from the outset that in a way I am not researching or exploring Islam inasmuch as I am working with Muslims and *their* exploration and production of Islam (or "Islams").

In anthropological writing a number of scholars from different academic traditions and times have contributed to my entry point into understanding Islam and Muslim individuals. For example Michael Gilsenan (2000) has essentially argued that the study of Islam requires an understanding that also takes into account the political, economic and colonial histories of a given context in question. He also emphasised the meaning of social relations, that the study of an element on its own or solely in connection with other elements deemed "religious" 'would not reveal its social meaning' and that we would 'have to be prepared to find that religion is often only a very minor influence'. (ibid., pp. 19–20.) This statement is partially echoed more recently by Magnus Marsden and Konstantinos Retsikas who questioned whether "being Muslim" is always at stake in what people of "Muslim background" do (2013, p. 2). Thus, everything an individual does cannot be reduced solely to religiosity even if he or she would be outspokenly pious. Similarly, even when seemingly present, religion might rather be a medium, a set of vocabulary, to articulate a certain

[16] It is of utmost importance to underline that in spite of the fact that Islam in Kurdistan is simultaneously connected with numerous global Islamic cultures and movements, the actual subject of my study is specifically Islam in Kurdistan and not for example Islam in Albania, Mali, Malaysia or Saudi Arabia, let alone some monolithic and essentialist Islam often pictured in popular media.

course of action than a fundamental devotional driving force. Also, as many other works (e.g. Marranci 2008; Soares & Osella 2009; Bowen 2012) have stressed, there is no singular Islam, neither univocal religious views nor a unified Muslim reality. For example, speaking of Arab contexts, Bruno Etienne has made the point that they are ultimately homogenous only in their compliance to monotheism and monism (2007, p. 239). Discussing Muslims in France, he highlights the fact that Islamic doctrines are constantly debated by many different fiercely competing religious groups (ibid., pp. 241–243), something which is equally true in Iraqi and Kurdish societies as well.

On the other hand, Islamic faith, or any other religious conviction for that matter, is obviously not simply reducible to a societal phenomenon. It is naturally a spiritual and ethical endeavour for each person subscribing to it and being a Muslim is equally varied and ambiguous experience for the individual believer as it is for societies and institutions. This is to say that alongside appreciating the historical, political, military, and economic circumstances, the personal significance of Islam must be taken into account, as faith and the moral conviction derived from it are also deeply personal and intimate matters. I would argue that as a religion, or rather, as a compilation of various religiously defined traditions, discourses and values, Islam often emphasises a very distinct approach to praxis. This is explicitly manifested by the importance of the exercise of (and debates about) prayer and the various norms on daily life covering matters such as food, drink, fasting, clothing, and behaviour in both public and private spaces. These norms, in turn, operate through categories of compulsory, recommended, allowed, disliked and forbidden. Thereby a Muslim, through individual actions, forms, and reforms, his or her subjectivity as a “practitioner” and embodies the words of God and the life of the Prophet. Or if put differently, practice becomes the basis of both the constitution and the expression of a religious and moral position.

The kind of embodiment and individual exercise of religiosity described in the paragraph above has been analysed for example by Saba Mahmood (2011), who wrote about women's piety movement in Cairo and Charles Hirschkind (2001), who has worked in the same city with a group of men regularly listening to taped cassette-sermons as an act of devotion. Another anthropologist writing about Muslims and Egypt, Samuli Schielke, has in turn stressed the importance of the inherent ambivalence of religious activity and the contradictions between stated intents and actual outcomes (2009). Here practice is, in effect, the outcome of constellations of conflicting social obligations, individual aspirations, moral double standards and compromises. In Schielke's words: 'I posit that it is precisely the fragmented nature of people’s biographies which, together with the ambivalent

nature of most moral subjectivities, should be taken as the starting-point when setting out to study moral discourse and ethical practice' (ibid. p. S37).

When analysing Islam in Slemani, I largely subscribe to the starting point outlined by Schielke above. Additionally, to understand the religious sentiments in a particular socio-economic context my focus is widely set on a larger body of students rather than solely on those who have undergone a major reformation in their relationship to Islamic faith in one way or another. This choice is motivated by the fact that rather than diverging, both secular and devout individual biographies actually converge in the uncertainty of socio-economic realities in Kurdistan. Actually, more or less all the students I was acquainted with, regardless of their conviction, felt compelled to position themselves in religious and moral terms, be it by measuring each other's clothing or discussing politics. Even on campuses, which have a degree of insulation from the surrounding society in terms of observation of social norms, spatial arrangements and behavioural judgements were commonplace. For instance, while at the private universities the set-up of seats was relatively non-gendered, at public universities the women sat in front and the men at the back, and man and woman sitting next to each other in the middle was a pronounced ideological statement which nobody missed.

The friction and the interplay between confessional and markedly secular positions have even perhaps intensified over the last six months due to the war against ISIS and from lecture halls to shopping centres, and mosques to public demonstrations, and ultimately from public to private spaces, these seemingly disparate moral dispositions constantly meet, challenge and reorient themselves vis-à-vis each other. Furthermore, my preference also allows for meaningful comparisons to be made between different dispositions. In this, my scope is closer to for example Jenny White's study on Islamist mobilisation in Turkey (2002), Benjamin Soares' elaboration on Islam and the neoliberal era in Mali (2005), Daromir Rudnyckyj's work on Islamic self-help coaching and 'market Islam' in Indonesia (2009), or even Michael M. J. Fischer's now classic monograph about the Iranian revolution (1980) than to for instance Mahmood's account of Cairo's pious women. I wish to achieve a perception which places religiosity within a wider societal context and does not omit the majority of students from the analysis by limiting its concentration solely on those undertaking to a perfected process of empowerment and self-realisation through religious reform.

The approach I have outlined so far is actually advocated quite eloquently by Christopher Houston. To him the anthropological representation of Islam is one which understands the diversity and the

contextuality of Islam, directs the analytical energy to describing the processes of knowledge production resulting in multiple "Islams", and politicises these processes and understands the underlying relations of power through which practices are made, sustained and transformed. Ultimately, the anthropology of Islam is also the anthropology of the Muslim *experience*. (Houston 2009, p. 207).

Finally, my thesis is also grounded on a body of literature which has focused on the global and transnational aspects of contemporary Muslim persuasions. On the one hand, the concept of global Islam is hardly anything new. For instance, Sadakat Kadri's (2011) history of the shari'a law or Gilles Kepel's (2006) meticulous study of the "trail" of Islamist action show that Muslim populations and Islamic teachings have transcended imperial frontiers as well as political and national borders throughout history. The same goes for people, nations, and commodities in general, like a number of anthropologists of political economy have demonstrated (e.g. Mintz 1986 & 1998; Wolf 1982). On the other hand, however, I believe it is fair to argue that even if they have to be appreciated in relation to their historical developments, the questions pertaining to Islamic faith and being Muslim in Slemani's campuses in 2014 are inherently very particular to our times.

This particularity, and even a sense of urgency, stems from three important points. These will be further analysed in the following chapters, but they are worth mentioning here as well. Firstly, I would argue that after September 11th 2001 religious sentiments have become the primary object of manipulation and thus pushed aside the nationalistic and anti-colonial convictions on which a diverse spectrum of organisations like the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) or Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were originally built upon. Thereby social discontent and powerlessness are explicitly framed in confessional and moral spheres and political action often cast as opposition to politics carried out by Christians or other non-Muslims (the militant Islamist case is discussed for example by Zubaida 2009, p. 81). Secondly, despite the rhetoric of global *ummah* (Muslim community) being often evoked, or "jihadist" militias even proclaiming a caliphate on the lands they have conquered (a challenge to both secular and religious authorities world-wide if there ever was one), the Muslim world and Islam's political dimensions are even more contested and fractured than before[17]. While Islamic texts (much like Christian texts, too) are taken to speak to the global community, the actual practice and mobilisation of faith always rest on a myriad of specific forms of social, cultural, economic and political life at the grass roots level, as the term 'vernacular politics' (White 2002) suggests. Thirdly, the proliferation of personal internet access and various

[17] See Kepel (2006, pp. 205–212) on the roots of this fragmentation in the Middle East, most importantly related to the mixed reactions and power games in connection with the early 1990s Gulf War and its aftermath.

forms of media have transformed the logic of many different activities ranging from political participation to proselytism and Qur'anic debates by allowing sermons, speeches, writings and news to be produced, utilised, consumed, copied and transmitted simultaneously across the globe. This third point is particularly important for my study, as the number of personal internet connections (as opposed to internet cafes or workplace access) and state of the art smartphones has dramatically increased over the past years.

2.2 Globalisation and the world-system

‘Have you heard about it? Some of them talk about making “a new Dubai”!’

An undergraduate student of economics, in his early twenties

The second theoretical standpoint on which I am building my thesis is that of the globalised, all-pervasive effect of capitalist world-economy. That some of the Kurdish political and economic elites had plans to make a new Dubai out of the capital Hewler (internationally known as Erbil) was something I heard many times during my fieldwork. It was generally mentioned with the tone of voice that was a peculiar mix of cynicism and embarrassment, because the majority of the students maintained that whatever money there was usually went into projects which carried very little benefit for the common people. Whether Hewler will ever become anything even remotely resembling Dubai remains to be seen, but the fact is that Hewler had been named as the 2014 Arab Tourism Capital by the international Arab Council of Tourism[18]. Similarly, Slemani had been declared as Kurdistan's ‘capital of culture’ by Kurdistan's parliament.

Both cases illustrated above are indicative of the introduction of international third party certification systems to Kurdistan Region. These systems, of which the most familiar examples are the fair trade and organic certifications for agricultural products[19] or international credit rating agencies such as Moody's Investors Service, are apt examples of the logic and the processes of globalisation.

[18] See Erbil Tourism 2014 website (http://www.erbiltourism2014.com). The fact that it was *Arab* Tourism Capital had made few people I talked with to cringe very unpleasantly.

[19] Paige West (2012) does an interesting analysis of the neoliberal logic of third party certification in relation to coffee production in Papua New Guinea. The certificates, which can cost thousands of dollars for the producer, are essentially an important business for Western coffee companies who market their coffee with images of impoverished and “primitive” locals being helped out. Globally, the actual benefits of such systems depend greatly on the location and the product.

The word 'globalisation' is specified by Oxford Dictionaries Online as follows: 'The process by which businesses or other organisations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale.' Alan Barnard defined globalisation more than a decade ago as 'the process of increasing contact between societies, especially in the economic sphere, across the globe' (2000, p. 201). For Immanuel Wallerstein (2004, p. 86), in turn, characteristic of globalisation is the global pressure to allow capital and goods flow freely. Along similar lines, I understand the word 'globalisation' to mean the sum and consequences of the specific processes through which particular economic structures (including, but not limited to, the relations of production and exchange) increasingly operate internationally towards global hegemony and legitimacy[20].

The way I am proposing to make sense of Kurdistan Region's connectedness to the processes of globalisation is first of all through the world-systems theories (e.g. Arrighi 2010; Wallerstein 1974a & 1974b & 2004). This perspective analyses a system that does not exist within a world, but *is* itself a world. The world-system analysts argue that while there have been other world-systems before, which were generally located in smaller geographical areas (e.g. Chase-Dunn & Hall 1997), we currently live in a single global world-system characterised by a hierarchical division of labour and unequal relations of exchange and production, where countries and regions are divided into core, semi-peripheral and peripheral positions[21]. This world-system is the capitalist world-economy, or the system that Samir Amin (2014) refers to as the 'generalised monopoly capitalism'. It is characterised by:

> '(1) [t]he centralized control of the economy by the monopolies; (2) the growing globalization, including relocation of manufacturing industries to the periphery; and (3) financialization.' (ibid. xvii)

Common with practically all proponents of the world-systems paradigm I am making a reference to is the perception that the modern world-system, the capitalist world-economy, is based on the ideal of endless accumulation of wealth through relative monopolisation of production, as the most

[20] During the last couple of decades, social sciences have often made the distinction between economic and social or cultural globalisation (such as the international spread of cuisine, popular culture, or literature, for example). Yet, the majority of social inventions or cultural practices are often inseparable from the economic implications by which they are conditioned. Most of the time my interlocutors did not make this conceptual distinction either. I believe, as Jonathan Friedman (2000b) has argued, that it is not cultural products that somehow "flow" or become "hybridised", but that instead it is the social structures, that condition cultural reproduction, which are globally interconnected.

[21] The essential theoretical component of the world-systems paradigm is the history and development of the capitalist world-economy (i.e. the modern world-system). Depending on the scholar, the beginnings are traced to different times, for example to the 13th (Arrighi 2010; Abu-Lughod J. 1989) or the 16th century (Wallerstein 1974a). My study here makes use of world-system analysis only in terms of the contemporary modern world-system, because the complete historical overview of Kurdistan is outside of both the scope and the page count of the thesis.

profitable products are those which are successfully monopolised. These products are the core products (for instance complex technology, medical patents et cetera) and states where this kind of production is dominant are consequently referred to as the core states. These regions in essence make up the Global North, the West and Japan primarily, often in conventional discourses referred to as the "developed countries". Production which can not be monopolised, such as the appropriation of raw natural resources and manual labour such as component assembly, is called as peripheral production and countries where these forms of production are in the overwhelming majority are assigned to the peripheral countries and regions, also elsewhere known as the Global South, or the "underdeveloped countries". Between these two ends of the world-system's axis there are the semi-peripheral countries, where both core and peripheral production exists (such as Brazil or China). Instead of production as such, world-systems paradigm focuses on markets and exchange. Briefly put, through the global trade and unilateral appropriation of natural resources and labour, unequal trade agreements included, the core states accumulate capital at the expense of the peripheral states who have no means to monopolise their products, which in turn creates inequality and dependency in both political and economic spheres. According to world-systems analysis the core then sustains this axial hierarchy through the processes of increasing political, economic and military penetration of the peripheral regions – processes which actually bring us back to the term 'globalisation'.

How does the idea of the modern world-system fit into analysing Kurdistan? I am arguing that the major economic change (or growth in capitalist terms) Kurdistan Region has been going through since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in 2003, and especially during the last 5–10 years, is actually the process of integration into the world-economy. I prefer to speak of integration in spite of the fact that, as a part of Iraq, Kurdistan had already been part of the world-system. The reason for this choice of terminology is twofold: firstly, it is only now that the oil-rich Kurdistan is fully integrated as a more or less separate entity and not as the peripheral part of the Republic of Iraq (a kind of double-periphery) and secondly, this integration, or reintegration, is actually part of global political and military processes where not just the traditional core states of the global system, but also the ascending semiperipheries (such as Turkey) seek to reap benefits. It is a reintegration to a peripheral position that stands in stark contrast to the semiperipheral position of some of the states in the proximity of the Greater Kurdistan, mainly Turkey, Iran, and some of the Gulf states. Michael Leezenberg (2005, p. 633) argues that the oil producing 'rentier states' (that is, their income is derived from foreign capital instead of the export of goods produced by their working class) would propose a challenge to the theory of dependency because their stable state structures and growing wealth would somehow render them less dependent of the core. Yet, my

thesis will seek to challenge this assumption. Another point which I believe is of great importance is that Kurdistan Region's integration has also followed very particular post-Cold War logic – that dominance over a peripheral or semi-peripheral region is established, with the enthusiastic support of local political, cultural and economic elites[22], through the discourses of humanitarian intervention, security and development[23] rather than through brute force.

Yet, in spite of the world-systems theories' general applicability, some of their characteristics are harder to digest – especially from an anthropological point of view. For example, due to their attempt at large-scale analysis, world-systems theorists rarely focus on the margins of social systems, states and societies[24]. Particular socio-cultural forms of life, the subject of study for most anthropologists, seems to be relevant to world-systems paradigm only insofar as they constitute of small-scale world-systems of the past. Neither do world-systems theorists widely seek to understand how people themselves around the world respond to and conceptualise the capitalist world-economy[25]. In much of his world-system writing Wallerstein[26], for instance, is mainly an analyst and a critic of the core with very little to say of the peripheries under the core's dominance. Still, anthropological approaches on the other hand, and my thesis is not an exception, stress the active stance of dominated or marginalised social classes and groupings (e.g. Theodossopoulos & Kirtsoglou 2010; Scott 2001). Another problematic theoretical claim, and this pertains to Wallerstein as well, is the insistence on the fact that in the world-economy there is only one mode of production (e.g. 1974b), while anthropologists have generally held that there are numerous modes of production, even existing simultaneously within the same socio-cultural context (Nash 1981, pp. 396–398).

Those older anthropological writings that have not dismissed the Wallersteinian paradigm altogether have tried to bridge the ethnographic shortcomings of the world-systems theory by showing how the

[22] It is true that some individuals, families, and even entire communities in Kurdistan Region have benefited from the flow of oil money. The gains are, however, to a large extent remarkably unevenly distributed, on the one hand, and the profits are based on distinctly unsustainable socio-political structures, on the other.

[23] In fact the Gulf War in 1990, which incidentally led to the establishment of the No-Fly zone over large part of Kurdistan Region a year later, has been held by some authors as a turning point in securitisation and peace-keeping, where aid work and military enforcement became increasingly entwined. See for example Mark Duffield (2014) on liberal peace-building.

[24] Obviously, this argument is not as all-encompassing as it sounds. Anthropologists within the world-system paradigm, or those that otherwise employ it extensively, do work on the margins and pose questions pertaining to experiences, grass roots social realities, and particular socio-cultural life-worlds (see for example Friedman 2000b; Friedman & Ekholm 1985).

[25] Of course, a small number of works by Arrighi, among others, have addressed revolution and what are generally described as 'anti-systemic movements'. See for example Arrighi, Hopkins & Wallerstein (2012).

[26] In addition to *The modern world-system, vol. 1* (1974a) and *World-systems analysis: An introduction* (2004), several other works are of importance here, especially *Historical capitalism* (1995) & *European universalism: The rhetoric of power* (2006).

systems point of view can be supported and improved by anthropological sensibilities (Nash 1981; Roseberry 1988). And while not necessarily identifying with the paradigm, some anthropologists, such as Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz whom I mentioned earlier, have had analytical points of departure closely related to world-systems theories because they also highlighted the importance of historical analysis of capitalist expansion to understand contemporary socio-cultural and political processes[27]. More recent anthropological work on globalisation, capitalism and domination has nonetheless mostly focused on particular phenomena illustrative of these global power structures rather than attempting to employ the world-systems terminology and scope. These works, such as Carolyn Nordstrom's study on war and economy in various sites of civil war and violent conflict (2004) and Didier Fassin's and Mariella Pandolfi's edited volume on the neoliberal logic of humanitarian intervention and securitisation (2010), have from the outset little if anything to do with the macro-narratives of Arrighi or Wallerstein, but I would argue that they all share a crucial trait, which is also paramount to the study I am pursuing here: that different contemporary life-worlds and sites of experience are interconnected through the global power-relations manifested in ideological, moral, political and economic conditions which we all recognise, whether we live in Finland, Puerto Rico, Iraq or Indonesia

2.3 Slemani, international

> "Generally with globalisation we have benefitted from it, I support the cultural openness it signals. I mean it's not like we had a choice whether we have these companies here or not, but in other terms, culturally, it's quite good."
>
> A third year public university student

So far I have gone through two different, internally polymorphous, strands of anthropological and social scientific analysis. One is concerned with the "making" of Muslim subjectivities through particular historical developments and contemporary social realities, and the other with the global political and economic hierarchy as well as the mechanisms of governance and intervention that sustain or expand it. That these two standpoints make sense when connected, is hardly a revelation. A number of studies in Islam already referred to actually make the explicit point of connecting local religious reformations to wider global economic frameworks. Similarly, Islamic faith and doctrines have never been limited or consigned to only one geographical location or sphere of political influence. Yet it is rare that these interconnected aspects of the study of religion and the world

[27] William Roseberry (1988, p. 162) has called these works 'antropological political economy'.

economy are elucidated to the extent I am proposing to do here and this is why I chose to explicitly bring them out separately, before merging them together in the following chapters.

Paul Farmer has argued that '[W]ithout a historically deep and geographically broad analysis, one that takes into account political economy, we risk seeing only the residue of meaning. We see puddles, perhaps, but not the rainstorms and certainly not the gathering thunderclouds' (Farmer 2004, p. 309). Similarly, my central claim is that to understand what one sees when walking around the streets of today's Slemani, for example shop windows saying 'stor pizza' in Swedish or advertisement posters affiliated with the Egypt-born *Ikhwan* (Muslim Brotherhood), and to perceive how contemporary Kurdish Muslim youth position themselves in a life-world wrought with a sense of continuous emergency, this connection of global capitalism to particular local religious sentiments needs to be explicated. The students, the subjects of my study, offer a unique view into the religious ambiguities, the rapid economic change, and the uncertainty of the region's future. They are, after all, the first generation that was born in the No-Fly zone of the 1990s, who grew up amidst the UN sanctions as well as the Kurdish civil war and reached adulthood during early 2010s with expectations of prestige and cosmopolitanism.

Picture 3: A statue commemorating victims of 1991, placed outside an artists' workshop. (Photograph by Ville Laakkonen)

3. The Arrows of Fate: Slemani and the Land of the Kurds

Look, from the Arabs to the Georgians
The Kurds have become like towers.
The Turks and Persians are surrounded by them.
The Kurds are on all four corners.
Both sides have made the Kurdish people
Targets for the arrows of fate.
They are said to be keys to the borders
Each tribe forming a formidable bulwark.
Whenever the Ottoman Sea [Ottomans] and Tajik Sea [Persians]
Flow out and agitate,
The Kurds get soaked in blood
Separating them [the Turks and Persians] like an isthmus.[28]

What is the role of histories and memories in the formation of the present? Whenever I have talked about Kurdistan with Kurds, be it in Slemani or in Finland or England, they are quick to point out how the Kurds have been subjugated and betrayed again and again over centuries by the states exercising control over the Greater Kurdistan. The notion that Kurdistan has been the victim of not only surrounding powers but Western political interests as well is also widespread[29]. My Kurdish acquaintances are also largely right. Historically, as Diane E. King points out (2014, p. 172), Kurdistan has been at the meeting point of three major empires: Ottoman, Persian and Russian. In other words, Kurdistan has been a kind of 'contested periphery' (Carlson 2011) residing between different empires, and with political, economic, and geographical importance to each one of them. Hamit Bozarslan (2014), in turn, makes the point that the events in Kurdistan and Kurdish aspirations to autonomy or sovereignty can not be separated from the discontinuities of the wider cycles of ‘states of violence’ that have gripped the Middle East, where demarcations between the state, border, extra-state, and trans-border actors have largely been diffused. Especially since the World War I Kurdish futures have been increasingly shaped by the political and economic

[28] Excerpt from *Mem and Zin* (*Mem û Zîn*) by 17th century Kurdish poet and writer Ahmad-I Khani. Translation from Amir Hassanpour (1992, pp. 53–55)

[29] In fact, in one of my group interview sessions at Slemani’s public universities I was asked by a student “where were you during the genocides?” I was representing Europe and the question was posed in reference to the ways how indifferent European governments had been to Kurdish claims.

aspirations of the Global North and more recently, in the context of the neoliberal 'War on Terror', Kurdistan became a geopolitical hotspot at the epicentre of operations carried out by the US-led coalition (with presence in both Turkey and the Persian Gulf) and the republics of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Thus, any attempt to explore the socio-economic and political realities of contemporary Slemani, and even its system of higher education, must be grounded on an understanding about the wider framework of different operational historical trajectories. These trajectories weave together a number of state and extra-state actors, colonial and political programs, experiences of persecution and violence as well as of insurgency and martyrdom, and ultimately connect Kurdistan Region with the rest of the Middle East, and the entire world, past, present and future.

One fundamental issue has persistently marked the history of the Kurdish people for hundreds of years. Given that the whole Greater Kurdistan has never constituted a sovereign state in the modern sense of the word, it is important to note how the different Kurdish populations and emirates or principalities have been in a constant struggle[30] for political sovereignty and territory with the states and empires who have included (or tried to include, often by force) parts of Kurdistan inside their borders or frontiers (e.g. Bruinessen 1992; Hardi 2013, pp. 111–112; Hassanpour 1992; McDowall 2004). Until perhaps the early 20th century, these struggles have been largely local and between princes, landlords or tribal chiefs and the state or empire administration. The struggle for an independent state, for which the Kurds are known best these days, is a more recent development.

According to Amir Hassanpour Kurdish nationalism originated from a feudal and tribal context as a response to the expansion of increasingly centralising empires (Ottoman and Persian) laying claims to the Kurdish lands (Hassanpour 1992, pp. 50–57). This process resulted in a nationalism which precedes the actual concept of a nation (Hassanpour 1994, p. 3). David McDowall, in turn, argues that despite the fact that the Kurds have made up an identifiable group for possibly more than two thousand years, the thought of a whole Kurdish people gained its current strength only in the late 19th century (McDowall 2004, pp. 1–2). This more recent development in forming a collective national identity coincides with the rise of Turkish and Arabic nationalisms (ibid. p. 2). Still, there are, as Kendal Nezan (1996, pp. 10–11) and Hassanpour (1992, pp. 56–57) point out, signs in classical literature and geography which suggest that while the idea of a comprehensive, distinct Kurdishness may not have always been as widely spread as it has now been for almost two centuries, it might nonetheless pre-date the European modernist notion of a nation-state borne by the French Revolution of the late 18th century.

[30] I use the term 'struggle' broadly here to describe any kind of political activity where the issues of local autonomy, land rights, and voluntary or coerced allegiances have been at stake. Many, but not all, of these struggles have been violent.

Both the relationships to sovereign states and the early Kurdish nationalistic aspirations culminated in the early 20th century's colonial power games. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the World War I, the Middle East went through a series of major geopolitical transformations: the caliph in Constantinople was replaced by Kemalist republicans in Ankara, the Ottoman Arab lands of Syria and Mesopotamia were divided between France and the Great Britain, and nobody could quite decide what to do with the Kurdish lands, where these different spheres of influence, together with Russian Empire now under Bolshevik rule, ran into each other. For a moment it looked like an independent Kurdistan could be born. However, these plans were ultimately crushed and, as a result of years of political jousting, haggling, and a number of violent conflicts (in which the British also took part), the current borders cutting the Greater Kurdistan into four parts came into effect. Southern Kurdistan, nowadays known as the Kurdistan Region, where the city of Slemani also lies, became eventually part of the new state of Iraq[31]. (King 2014, pp. 19–20; McDowall 2004, pp. 115–150; Nezan 1996, pp. 11–12).

Kurds in and out of Kurdistan have not, of course, been passive through the tumultuous history of the Middle East. Families and emirates, and more recently political parties and regional administrations, have struck alliances or cooperated with whichever faction or state they have perceived the most beneficial to their cause, Kurd or non-Kurd[32]. The same goes for warfare. And Kurdish notables have jockeyed for political position and power not only among themselves but also in relation to the states and empires under whose rule their lands have been subjected to. While the Kurds have collectively had to endure a number of massacres[33], even genocide, Kurdish factions, too, have taken part in perpetrating horrors of the very same kind[34]. In other words, if we assume the world to consist of more or less whole nations constituted by shared socio-historical and ethno-linguistic characteristics, the Kurdish nation has been a nation among other nations, most often the "targets of arrows of fate" as the poet Khani put it, but nevertheless active agents rather than solely passive recipients.

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[31] There was a British–Turkish dispute over the Mosul vilayet, a province practically consisting of many parts of what is now Kurdistan Region. The fate of the province, inclusion to British ruled Mesopotamia (Iraq), was ultimately decided by the League of Nations (e.g. McDowall 2004, pp. 142–146)

[32] On Kurdish politics, and politics related to Kurdistan, in the past, see for example Bruinessen (1992 & 2002) as well as McDowall (2004).

[33] In the 20th century alone, see for instance Bruinessen 1994 (pp. 3–14) and McDowall (2004, pp. 207–210) for analyses of the Dersim massacre (1937–1938) in Turkey and Joost R. Hiltermann 2007 (pp. 81–85) for the gassing of Serdesht in Iran by Saddam Hussein's forces. The genocidal Anfal campaign and the gas attack on Halabja will be discussed in this thesis in some detail.

[34] One notable example is the Hamidiya cavalry, largely drawn from Kurdish areas and apparently modeled after the Russian Cossacks, which served the Ottoman sultan and took part in harassing and killing Armenians (Bruinessen 2002, pp. 10–11; McDowall 2004, pp. 59–65). Kurdish troops were also taking part in the Armenian Genocide of 1915 (see for example Bruinessen 1999b).

3.1 Poisoned arrowheads: The Anfal and Halabja

‘This is what you get! Taste that!’ — and the torment of the Fire awaits the disbelievers.[35]

“If they could, the Arabs would do it to us again”

A middle-aged Kurdish businessman

There is a particular moment in time, a point in a particular historical trajectory, which is of extreme importance for Kurdistan Region in Iraq. In today’s Slemani Governorate it is carved on the mountain ranges eroded by shelling, engraved on monuments commemorating the dead, and the events are recreated and remembered by countless Kurdish proverbs. The Anfal, the ‘spoils of (holy) war’[36], largely ignored by both Western governments and news agencies at the time (Hiltermann 2007; McDowall 2004, pp. 361–363; Yildiz 2007, pp. 32–33)[37], was a genocide campaign ordered by Iraqi president Saddam Hussein to suppress the Kurdish resistance once and for all. While the devastation that Anfal caused is these days well documented (e.g. Human Rights Watch 1993), it is discussed in some detail here because its consequences still continue to shape the social realities in Slemani and other parts of Kurdistan Region.

During the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), Iranian government succeeded in facilitating a truce between the leading Kurdish nationalist forces (essentially the parties Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK) which had fought against the Ba’athist regime’s oppression for decades, but had remained hostile towards each other. The war had raged for years already and Saddam Hussein feared the threat that the Iranian army would pose if it was supported by a unified Kurdistan Front[38]. (Yildiz 2007, p. 25). As yet another round of peace talks with the Front had ended, by President Hussein’s decree his cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid was given virtually absolute power to deal with the Kurdish resistance as he pleased. The Kurds in the region were

[35] The Qur’an, 8th sura (‘Al-Anfal’), 14th verse (translation by Muhammad A.S. Abdul Haleem).

[36] Interestingly, the 2004 Oxford University Press translation by M.A.S. Abdul Haleem translates Al-Anfal in a far more neutral manner as ‘battle gains’. Al-Anfal, the 8th sura of Qur'an, deals with the Battle of Badr, the first battle between Muslims and their Meccan opponents. However, as I will show below, there was nothing Qur’anic or divine about the Anfal operations.

[37] Sources I am referring to here argue that for many governments supporting Iraq against Iran lead them to overlook the brutality of the Iraqi regime. According to Choman Hardi (2013, p. 108) Ayatollah Khomeini’s Iran was seen as such a threat in the US government that they were inclined to refrain from publicly criticising Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi state, who were their allies. American and other Western companies had stakes in Iraq too (ibid.). The silence was not obviously only of Western making. Hardi points out that the Iraqi government also went to great lengths in trying to hide the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds, and that foreign journalists were not allowed to enter Kurdistan until the 1990s (ibid. pp. 109 & 117).

[38] On the other hand, as Hardi notes (2013, p. 113), it is not accurate to assume Anfal to be part of the Iran–Iraq War. Instead the Kurdish front’s cooperation with Iran offered Saddam Hussein’s regime an ideal pretext for solving the “Kurdish problem” up north. Many of the attacks were carried out after Iran and Iraq had signed an armistice.

accustomed to expecting atrocities from the central administration, for example hundreds of villages had already been razed by the Iraqi army in 1985[39], resulting in 55 000 people becoming homeless (McDowall 2004, p. 352). In 1987 al-Majid began the systematic operations of deportations and executions. In early 1988 he launched officially the Anfal campaign, a military operation which aimed at cutting the support and shelter from the Kurdish peshmerga fighters by attacking the rural Kurdish civilian population[40]. Large areas of Kurdistan were declared as prohibited zones. Villages were shelled, looted, and razed to the ground, people were forcibly relocated. Detentions, rape and torture were carried out in methodical fashion. While quite a few people were shot on the village-sites without distinction between civilians and peshmerga, the majority of them were taken to death camps such as Topzawa near Kirkuk. After a while, usually after a couple of days of beatings and interrogation, (mostly) teenage and adult males were loaded onto trucks and brought to execution grounds where they were shot and piled up in trenches. (Hardi 2013; Human Rights Watch 1993; McDowall 2004, pp. 357–367; Yildiz 2007, pp. 25–31).

One of the trademark aspects, and certainly the most infamous internationally[41], of the Anfal and the military operations that lead to it, was the use of chemical weapons. Iraq had already launched its chemical and biological warfare programmes in the 1960s but the production of chemical warfare agents escalated, with the help from numerous Western companies[42], during the Iran–Iraq War. Chemical weapons proved useful against the Iranian army and al-Majid, who would later receive the nickname Chemical Ali, decided to employ them to quell the Kurdish resistance. (Spiers 2010, pp. 102–109). Mustard gas, sarin, VX and a number of other chemical and nerve agents were used to massacre both peshmergas and civilians seeking shelter from air-raids. The single most destructive chemical attack was carried out against the people of Halabja[43], a Kurdish town in a peshmerga stronghold area, whose control Iraqi army had lost to PUK and Iranian forces. Approximately 5 000 people, mostly civilians, died (McDowall 2004, pp. 357 – 358; Human Rights

[39] Disappearances, deportations, executions, and torture were commonplace in Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist Iraq, but the Iran–Iraq War brought arguably the worst out of President Hussein's military apparatus. For example, already in 1983, before the Anfal, a retaliation for Barzani's KDP's alliance with Iran resulted in the disappearance of up to 8 000 members of the Barzani clan (Yildiz 2007, p. 52). In 1985 Iraqi troops rounded up some 500 children in Slemani and a considerable number of them were tortured and eventually killed (McDowall 2004, p. 352).

[40] This is not to say that the urban cities would not have been affected. For instance, systematically executed violence, house-by-house searches, and disappearances took place in Slemani which was placed under a curfew in April 1988 (Hardi 2013, p. 114).

[41] While it took years before the general public as well as Western governments acknowledged the horrors of Anfal, certain organisations (as well as Iran, who did so already during the Iran–Iraq War) tried to alert the international community to Iraqi army's use of chemical weapons. See for example Physicians for Human Rights (1989).

[42] See for instance Hardi (2013, pp. 108–109) and Hiltermann (2007).

[43] As for example Human Rights Watch (1993) has noted, the Halabja attack did not follow the pattern of the Anfal operations while it occurred at the same time. It was carried out solely with air-raids and ground forces were not used to round up civilians for arrests and executions. However, I would argue that as an atrocity it is inseparable from the Anfal, and my Kurdish acquaintances do not make this largely academic distinction.

Watch 1993 put the number of casualties between 4 000 and 7 000) and the long-term health effects for both survivors and their descendants were devastating (Gosden 1998a & 1998b; also Dworkin et al. 2008).

The Anfal, which raged until the general amnesty proclaimed in September 1988 and claimed well over 100 000 lives[44] and displaced, orphaned and widowed even greater numbers of people, as well as destroyed the majority of rural villages in Kurdistan, is deeply embedded in the social memory of the Kurdish nation. It touches virtually all generations in one way or another and structures the social and political life in the region. Like Hardi (2013, p. 107), I would argue it is the foremost symbol of victimhood by which Kurdish aspirations for statehood or complete sovereignty are legitimised. And considering the destruction that was inflicted during the campaign, the scars are understandably deep.

One day in April 2014 I was taking photographs of statues in front of the Slemani city library when a middle-aged man approached me and asked if I liked the statues. After an initial chat about my impressions about the city, we began to talk about economy and politics as we walked down Salim Street. The man was, it turned out, visiting his relatives in Kurdistan Region and had himself permanently relocated to Asia where he had construction businesses. On the subject of tourism he said: "you see the Arabs coming here now. How long do you think this is going to last? You know the Anfal. If they could, the Arabs would do it to us again. That's what they're like." This was not the only time I encountered an outspoken stance of mistrust towards Arabs[45], usually directed at visitors and newcomers to the Kurdish region. The sentiment that your oppressors, those who murdered your family, walked away and still live next to you is relatively common among Kurds. Even though Saddam Hussein and a number of high-ranking Ba'athists were executed or sentenced to long prison terms, many Kurds feel like there has not been a closure, a full acknowledgement of the horrors of Anfal or complete carrying out of justice. The fact that Saddam Hussein was never officially found guilty of the Anfal[46] has not helped either.

Many of those, especially at the grass roots level, who took part in the Anfal probably do walk free. This does not, however, apply solely to Iraqi army troops but is also true for the irregular pro-

[44] For instance, Yildiz (2007, p. 25) puts the figure to up to 180 000 and McDowall (2004, p. 359) estimates it to be 150 000–200 000.

[45] It is curious how the word 'Arab' equates with 'Iraqi' in Kurdistan Region. Christians and other minorities, in turn, were not considered Iraqi or Arab as such in everyday conversations, but rather as something else who the Kurds just happened to live with.

[46] Saddam Hussein was hanged for crimes against humanity, but the crime in question was the massacre of Shi'ites in Dujail. Although initially standing for trial for Anfal too, President Hussein was executed before the trial was finished. (See for example Hardi 2013, p. 120).

government Kurdish militias who were employed by Saddam Hussein, the *jash*[47]. The history and role of the *jash* are complicated. The Iraqi heads of state employed Kurdish militias against insurgents even before Saddam Hussein. These irregular pro-government troops, officially known as *fursan* (knights), were essentially recruited from three kinds of pools: some were simply unemployed looking for work, others (especially certain tribal chiefs and their men) loathed the Kurdish nationalist rebel leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani[48] and his followers, and some were coerced into service. (McDowall 2004, p. 312).

Saddam Hussein then made the *jash* militia considerably stronger especially during the 1980s to free regular forces for the war against Iran and to keep the Kurds divided. The *jash* organisation worked in the following way: government bankrolled a local Kurdish leader (tribal, religious, or political) as a *mustishar* ('advisor'), who then recruited the troops from his followers or fellow village-men. Some of the *jash* were happy to be bankrolled by the Ba'athist state, and others opposed the Kurdish resistance, but many of them either felt forced to join or they joined because they feared for their families or their villages' future. Some were also double-agents, secretly affiliated with the Kurdish resistance. (McDowall 2004, pp. 354–356). Many *jash* factions would later switch sides in the 1991 uprising and join the Kurdistan Front led by KDP and PUK (ibid. p. 371). In other words, while some really did oppose the Kurdish resistance despite their ethno-linguistic affiliation, for the majority joining the *jash* was in some respects seen as the only way out of the burdens of the cruel war and rampant poverty[49].

Nonetheless, a large number of the *jash* were involved in the Anfal as perpetrators, especially rounding up civilians to be trucked away to detention (e.g. Hardi 2013, p. 113; McDowall 2004, p. 358 – though McDowall suggests that at least not all of the *jash* necessarily knew the people would be heading to certain extermination). Some *jash* leaders also lured civilians out of their hideouts by announcing false amnesties (Hardi 2013, p. 116). After the Gulf War in the 1990s the KDP and PUK-led Kurdistan Front granted amnesty to the *jash*. Many of them joined one of the two parties and some *mustishars*, who either got rich while leading the *jash* or were rich already, have later secured important positions in politics and business. This has caused a lot of resentment, especially

[47] 'Donkey's foal' or 'little donkey' in Kurdish.

[48] Mulla Mustafa Barzani was a tribal chief, head of KDP and a leader in the Kurdish nationalist resistance. Mulla Mustafa gathered quite a following and was a major player in Iraqi politics, but his uncompromising character made a good number of enemies among the Kurds too. His son Masoud Barzani, the current leader of KDP, is the only president Kurdistan Region has had since the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Barzanis are keeping it in the family, as both the KRG prime minister and the head of KDP intelligence services are currently Mulla Mustafa's grandsons, Masoud's nephew and son respectively.

[49] McDowall (2004, pp. 356–357) also points out that the *jash* were not, after all, exempt from Saddam Hussein's Arabicising resettlement programme later on. Many were forcibly relocated after the Kurdish nationalists were crushed.

from the victims of Anfal, and a heated public debate has been going on for years[50]. I personally got reminded of this when I was driving around Slemani with a friend of mine, from a family strongly affiliated with one of the old leftist opposition parties. He showed me the neighbourhood he used to live in as a child. He recounted how just few blocks away from his home had lived a government collaborator, a *jash*. "Oh yes, we still talk about *them*", he noted.

The Anfal has also been operationalised as a political tool, much like war veterans in virtually every region of the world. For example, during the dispute over the export of Kurdish oil, which led to Baghdad withholding Kurdistan Region's 17 percent share of the federal budget, some Kurdish politicians rhetorically likened the economic embargo to the Anfal. At the same time, many victims of Anfal have often protested that politicians, although making promises of social and economic support in political rallies, have largely forgotten the victims' plight while commoditising the their traumas[51]. Recently the use of chemical weapons in Syria and ISIS' brutal attacks on Kurds and Yazidis in Iraq, including some reports of local Arab residents joining the ISIS forces[52], have reopened the wounds of Anfal in an unprecedentedly violent manner, not only in Kurdistan Region but elsewhere in the Greater Kurdistan and around the diaspora. The message to the world by many KRG politicians and quite a few Kurdish intellectuals has been clear: Look at what is happening, this is why we need a state of our own. Why should we be different from the Armenians and the Jews?

3.2 War and Exodus

> Time and again … Invariably, they would find their quest for self-determination tempered by the bitter fact that, once again, historical and geographical circumstances conspired to thwart their aspirations.[53]

[50] For example, in the spring of 2014 a protest of dozens of families of Anfal victims demanded the *jash* to be arrested and brought to stand trial. According to Gorran's KNNC news agency (May 24, 2014b) the Iraqi High Court has issued arrest warrants for 258 *jash* who collaborated with the Ba'athist government during Anfal, but the Kurdish authorities have been reluctant to act. The Faili Kurdish Shafaq News (May 25, 2014) reported, however, of one arrest in Khanaqin, a Kurdish town in Diyala governorate.

[51] After the US-led invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, a monument was built in Halabja. The inauguration ceremony was attended by US Secretary of State Colin Powell. Residents of Halabja felt, perhaps rightly, that the millions of US dollars provided by the Coalition Provisional Authority could have been put to better use in a town largely wrecked by war. In 2006, on the eighteenth anniversary of the chemical attack, a protest against the PUK authorities turned violent and security guards opened fire. Furious Halabjans forced their way inside the monument and burned it down, destroying photographs of their dead or disappeared relatives in the process. (Kakeyi March 5, 2012).

[52] For Arab residents seen cooperating with ISIS against the Yazidi in Shingal (Sinjar) see Judit Neurink (August 21, 2014), and Arab residents of Gwer reportedly turning against Kurds when ISIS entered the town see for instance Wladimir van Wilgenburg (August 13, 2014). Obviously, as I will try to elaborate later on, these matters are far more complicated than they are made out to look like.

[53] Hiltermann (2008, p. 7)

After the Anfal operations, the Kurdistan Front had practically nothing to lose. Large numbers of the civilian population, especially in rural Kurdistan, were either exterminated or displaced and huge swathes of countryside were desolate. The majority of whatever gains the peshmerga had made during the 1980s were lost and as a ceasefire was eventually brokered between Iran and Iraq, the former withdrew its support for the Kurdish troops[54]. The Kurdish nationalist forces' numbers were considerably smaller than before and, as the greatest concern was getting the people into safety, their operations were reduced to small-scale ambushes against the Iraqi army. While the hopeless guerrilla war continued sporadically, at least parts of the Kurdish rebel leadership probably considered parleying, yet again[55], with Saddam Hussein. (McDowall 2004, pp. 368–369.)

Even if the future looked grim by the end of the 1980s, the tide seemed to turn (temporarily – as the Kurdish Front would later find out) in 1990. Because of the Iran–Iraq War Iraq was exhausted and ridden with debt. Saddam Hussein sought to re-establish his domestic and foreign political power by challenging the prevailing political and economic order in the region. President Hussein began sabre-rattling in public against major Gulf oil exporters such as Kuwait and United Arab Emirates, who he claimed were working for US interests[56] (Ibrahim July 18, 1990). Eventually, Iraq threw down the gauntlet[57], first in a misjudged attempt to annex its creditor and fellow oil-producer Kuwait and then manoeuvring Iraqi troops close to the Saudi Arabian border[58]. These episodes first resulted in UN sanctions and a trade ban to be imposed on the Iraqi state and ultimately, in 1991, provoked an intervention from Iraq's erstwhile patron, the US, in the largest and fastest mobilisation

[54] When the formal peace agreement was eventually signed it practically meant that the Iran-Iraq border would be sealed, which cut further support and habitation from the Kurdish guerrillas. The Kurds did, however, apparently still receive aid from Iraqi Ba'ath's long-standing enemy, Syria. (McDowall 2004, pp. 368–369.)

[55] As Bartu (2010, p. 1329) points out, there had been negotiations for autonomy already in 1963, 1970–1974, and 1983. Each time the negotiations failed the relations between Baghdad and Kurds took a turn for the worse.

[56] I would argue that there was a hint of truth in this statement as the US certainly sought to establish a formidable presence in the Middle East, and not least through the major oil exporters. Nevertheless, Saddam Hussein's actual motives had a lot more to do with Kuwait's oil and ports than any kind of "anti-imperialist" agenda. (See for example Stork & Lesch 1990.)

[57] Besides the obvious political and economic dimensions of the conflict there is another aspect to the invasion which has religious implications – even more so with regard to the global Islamic mobilisation. Until Iraq's attack on Kuwait, Saudi Arabia (another of Iraq's creditors) had established itself as the most formidable seat of religious authority in the Sunni Arab world. Saddam Hussein, who would gradually reinvent himself as a devout Sunni leader over the following decade or so, now challenged this authority. Both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia had to rely on US military support: the former to drive the Iraqi troops away and the latter to secure its borders. The fact that the US, an ally of Israel, had bases in the Sunni heartland from where it struck against another Arab state, was humiliating for the Saudi leadership as well as for the other Gulf monarchies. Some scholars have suggested that this fact began the intense fragmentation of Sunni Arab religious legitimacy (e.g. Kepel 2006, pp. 208–210), which, I would say, is still under way.

[58] Saddam Hussein did also strike Saudi Arabia and Israel with missiles during the war and he apparently was prepared to employ chemical agents again, but both fear of losing his reputation as well as the threat of military retribution from the US-led coalition forces deterred him from doing so (Spiers 2010, pp. 113–118).

of US troops since the end of World War II. The events that unfolded would be known as the First Gulf War[59]. (McDowall 2004, p. 369; Stork & Lesch 1990; Yildiz 2007, p. 34.)

The Iraqi army was no match for US military. On top of that war had also halted Iraq's oil production. Despite the fact that the US-led coalition forces had taken Saddam Hussein's military apparatus in a chokehold, it never struck the final blow to the regime that at least some of the spectators regionally and globally expected. Instead, the US administration did the unthinkable: in a speech President George Bush announced the following: 'there's another way for the bloodshed to stop, and that is for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their hands, and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside.'[60]

This above announcement had, intended or not, two consequences. The Shi'ites, oppressed under Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime and subjected to atrocities similar to the ones the Kurds had faced, began an uprising in the Shi'ite cities south of the country (Yildiz 2007, p. 35). The Kurdish resistance had stayed away from the Gulf War because the horrors of chemical attacks and the memories of those 'Anfalized' (i.e. disappeared during the operations) were still fresh, and the Kurdish leadership definitely did not want to risk President Hussein's retribution or look like traitors in the eyes of other Muslim-majority countries (McDowall 2004, pp. 369–370). However, like in the Shi'ite communities, among the Kurds the announcement was taken as an indication of US support, and with Baghdad's forces considerably weakened and in any case focused on another frontline, the Kurds rose in revolt. The Kurdish 'intifada', the Uprising, began.

The Uprising was not centrally administered, especially from the beginning. In fact the Kurdistan Front 'merely followed the people onto the streets'[61]. In many places the majority of the former *jash* chiefs, now under the amnesty from the Kurdish resistance leaders, actually led the charge, with their men expanding the strength of Kurdish forces from 15 000 to well over 100 000 in a matter of

[59] An autobiographical remark: this was the first moment I became, as a child, aware of the Kurdish people. I remember hearing wild stories about the brutality of the Ba'athist regime followed subsequently by news reports covering the US attack. The Gulf War and its national and international consequences as well as the broader history of Iraq of the period fall beyond the scope and page count of my study but are addressed in detail elsewhere (e.g. Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett 2001, pp. 281–310; Tripp 2007, pp. 239–250). It is nevertheless an important backdrop to events which took place in Kurdistan over the next couple of years and hence worth mentioning here.

[60] Quoted in Hardi (2013, p. 122) and McDowall (2004, p. 372). Yildiz (2007, p. 34) quotes the same speech but without the reference to "the Iraqi people" and speaking of "fighting" instead of "bloodshed". However, he writes that several messages, in essence carrying the same sentiment, were broadcast by the Voice of America radio station (ibid.). The Saudi-controlled Voice of Free Iraq broadcast similar statements in both Kurdish and Arabic (McDowall 2004, p. 372).

[61] Front spokesman Burhan Jaf to news agency AFP in 4 March 1991. Quoted in McDowall (2004, p. 371).

days[62]. Initially, the uprising was militarily a success[63]. Most of Kurdistan Region, including major cities such as Slemani, Hewler, Dohuk and Zakho, was once again in Kurdish rebels' hands. In just a couple of weeks the city of Kirkuk was conquered, or, as the Kurds would insist, reclaimed. (ibid. pp. 371–372.)

In reality the US administration had no intentions to back up militarily the possible revolt in Iraq. This soon became painfully apparent to both the Kurds and the Shi'ites. First Saddam Hussein set out to retake Southern Iraq, his troops killing some 300 000 people in the process (Yildiz 2007, p. 36). After the Shi'ite rebellion in the south of Iraq was suppressed, Saddam Hussein moved his Republican Guards, with tanks, aircrafts and heavy weaponry, to the Kurdish region. In less than two weeks after Kurds had gained the control of Kirkuk, the The Iraqi forces regained control of the majority of the bigger Kurdish cities. Like during the Anfal, the Iraqi troops' methods were cruel. For example, there were reports of phosphorous bombs being dropped from helicopters on fleeing civilians[64]. More than 100 000 people were captured by the Iraqi forces in Kurdish areas and at least some 20 000 of these people disappeared. (McDowall 2004, pp. 372–373; Yildiz 2007, p. 36.) While oppression and violence had continued after the Anfal[65], it was the scale of Saddam Hussein's retribution that gripped the Kurdish population with unprecedented fear. Over 1 500 000 Kurds left their homes and tried to make their way to either Turkey or Iran[66]. A number of the refugees became stranded in mountain passes with very little shelter or water (King 2008, p. 331; Yildiz 2007, p. 37). Despite several new emergency camps being set up, many refugees, especially the oldest and the youngest, fell sick or died (McDowall 2004, p. 375).

If the Anfal went largely unnoticed at the time, nevertheless the plight of Kurds in 1991 was widely publicised. Under the mounting public pressure, and a tragic refugee crisis in their hands, the US-led coalition as well as several UN member states decided to act. First, the UN Security Council

[62] This event transformed the status of many of the *jash*. As the *mustishars* were recruited by the parties in the Kurdistan Front (especially KDP and PUK, but smaller parties such as Kurdistan Socialist Party KSP too), so did the men under their command become integrated into the Front's forces. (McDowall 2004, pp. 371–372.)

[63] According to Yildiz (2007, p. 35) more than 50 000 troops from Iraqi armed forces are thought to have deserted during this time. He also points out that during this period known members of the various Iraqi security and intelligence services, as well as other high-ranking Ba'athists, were most likely singled out for revenge killings, in both the Kurdish north and the Shi'ite south (ibid. pp. 35–36).

[64] See for example journalist Rafet Balli about the road to Turkey in The Independent April 23 1991, cited by McDowall (2004, p. 373). According to McDowall (ibid.) similar scenes took place on the roads to Iran. See also Amnesty International (July 16, 1991).

[65] See Middle East Watch and Physicians for Human Rights (1992, p. 11) for examples of executions carried out in 1989.

[66] McDowall (2004, p. 373) estimates the number of refugees in this instance to be 1 500 000. Yildiz (2007, p. 36) concludes, referring to Lawyers Committee for Human Rights report (1992), that up to 500 000 people took refuge in Turkey while 1 500 000 ended up in Iran. Interestingly, both sources note that of the two neighbouring states, both known for their heavy-handedness towards their own Kurdish minorities, Turkey had largely remained hostile while Iran was far more welcoming to the Kurdish refugees.

resolution 688, follow up to the original resolution 687 during the Gulf War, was passed which condemned the Iraqi state's repression of its own people. Second, the US and Turkish governments agreed on the international relief operation called 'Operation Provide Comfort'. Additionally the Iraqi government, now having lost the war and agreed to a ceasefire, was obliged to help logistically in the relief aid to Kurds within Iraq and taking refuge in neighbouring countries. Third, and the most important, decision was the introduction of 'Operation Safe Haven'. At Turkey's suggestion, who made the proposition largely to deal with the international criticism of its refugee policies, a safe haven (or a buffer zone for refugees) was established in much of what is now the Kurdistan Region. (Hassanpour 1994, p. 6; McDowall 2004, pp. 373–376; Yildiz 2007, pp. 37–42.) The safe haven project as well as the imposition of a no-fly zone on northern (Kurdish) and southern (Shi'ite) parts of Iraq ensured that despite the fact that clashes (which caused the further deaths and the displacement of additional hundreds of thousands of people[67] as well as thousands of casualties for the Iraqi forces; see for example McDowall 2004, p. 378) still erupted and fear justifiably lingered among the Kurdish population, the absolutely worst was finally over.

3.3 Poverty, violence, and civil war

> 'But violence has its tomorrow even in situations in which war and genocide have given way to peace and security and the promise of a more hopeful future.'[68]

The 1990s were still extremely difficult for the Kurds in Iraq. With Saddam Hussein's troops and administrators withdrawn from the region they were more or less in charge of their own affairs, but struggling economically. In addition to the sanctions and the trade embargo imposed by the United Nations as a result of Iraqi state's invasion of Kuwait, the fledgling semi-autonomy was facing a separate blockade set up by Baghdad. Kurdish employee's salaries were cut off and the imports of provisions and fuel to Kurdistan were severely limited. Kurdish-controlled areas were surrounded by minefields and Iraqi army troops. Slemani was struggling too, because it was furthest away from the Turkish supply route. UN relief efforts were also often disrupted. In short, the Kurdish regions of Iraq were militarily besieged and under a heavy economic attack[69]. (McDowall 2004, pp. 378–384; Yildiz 2007, pp. 73–78.)

[67] The events around the turn of the decade signalled also the beginning of the larger scale of migration of Kurds from the Iraqi Kurdistan to Europe and the United States.

[68] Paul Farmer (2009, p. 42).

[69] At the time of my fieldwork, when al-Maliki's government in Baghdad was withholding Kurdistan Region's 17 percent share of the federal budget, parallels to the situation just some two decades earlier were apparent especially to the older generations

Under the shadows of political isolation, economic hardships, and dangers of renewed war certain important events and developments occurred, which can still be seen in Slemani and the Kurdistan Region as a whole. Their implications for the social realities and imaginaries of contemporary Slemani will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters, but they are worth mentioning in this historical overview for the sake of completeness.

First of all, despite its internal struggles, and its status as a widely unrecognised entity, the region managed to successfully hold its first own elections in 1992. The process resulted in a two-party system with the Kurdistan Regional Government and the 105-seat parliament lead jointly by the rivals KDP and PUK[70]. (McDowall 2004, pp. 380 – 382) Second of all, smuggling and extra-legal trade networks, commonplace in all societies ravaged by violent conflict and economic uncertainty[71], proliferated. (Leezenberg 2005, p. 642; McDowall 2004, p. 390, 392; Yildiz 2007, p. 75) At the same time all three major political actors, KRG, the political parties, and local landlords, were trying to boost their revenues from the same sources, mainly the taxation of trade (McDowall 2004, p. 383). Unsurprisingly, the KRG administration finished last in the race. Thirdly, and finally, exorcising the demons of some three decades of totalitarian rule proved difficult. Internal and external socio-political pressures, economic disparities, land disputes, fierce political and personal rivalries[72], and a long tradition in the use of excessive force with impunity plunged Iraqi Kurdistan into armed conflict between KDP and PUK in 1994. The situation was further aggravated by the interference of Baghdad as well as Turkey and Iran. A state of civil war, which was marked by continuous violence and uncontrolled strong-man politics, lasted until 1998. Over the four years at least thousands of people died, disappeared, or became displaced. (Leezenberg 2005, pp. 638–639, 641; McDowall 2004, pp. 386–392; Yildiz 2007, pp. 48–50) One important result of the conflict was that Kurdistan Region had effectively to two parallel administrations until 2006, a fact which still marks many of the internal political functions.

Some much-needed assistance was provided to many of the inhabitants within the KRG-controlled zone through the UN's Oil-For-Food programme, which allowed the Iraqi state to sell some of its oil to meet the humanitarian needs that the sanctions were creating. It did, however, suffer from several problems nonetheless: part of the money went to the Iraqi state's war reparations, UN's operational costs, and to the weapons inspection program that was taking place in accordance with the previous

[70] Governmental posts were arranged so that where PUK member was the minister a KDP member would be the deputy, and vice versa (Yildiz 2007, p. 46). Many of the smaller parties were dissolved into the two major leading formations of the Front, KDP and PUK. They both had 50 seats in the parliament with the remaining five reserved for Assyrians. (McDowall 2004, pp. 380–382). At this point, the Islamic parties and the Turkmen (as well as smaller minorities) had no separate parliamentary representation.

[71] This important point is discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

[72] Most notably between KDP camp led by Masoud Barzani and PUK camp led by Jalal Talabani.

UN Security Council resolutions. Proposed projects also progressed slowly, and the UN, careful not to insult Baghdad, did allow Saddam Hussein considerable leverage in the program's implementation. It also created a culture of dependency in an already strongly centralised state. Despite its short-comings, it is estimated that if the program was terminated 60 percent of Iraqi population would not have been able to feed itself. (Yildiz 2007, pp. 71–75).

An important quality to the Kurdish experience that has to be addressed here is the inception of the Kurdish diaspora[73] which largely gained its current volume due to the violence of the 1980s and 1990s. Individual Kurds and smaller communities had been escaping from marginalisation and oppression already during the previous decades (as well as settled around the world for other reasons too), but there is a striking increase from the 1980s onwards. As I have already noted, over a million Kurds fled the region in the Exodus of 1991. Prior to these events, however, the transnational quality of the Kurdish nation had already began to take form. The 1979 revolution in Iran and the following persecution of minorities had Kurds steadily fleeing the Islamic Republic from 1980 onwards. The PKK-led insurgency against the Kemalist state in Turkey had displaced a number of Northern Kurds since the mid-1980s and the Iran–Iraq War and the Anfal campaigns had done the same in Kurdistan Region in the south. Many fled to neighbouring countries, to the Soviet Union and so on, but many routes and paths have ultimately led to the Global North. *Newroz*, the Kurdish New Year, is celebrated in halls and parks from Toronto to Tampere and London to Düsseldorf. Even if my thesis focuses on the larger, world-economy level aspects of transnational phenomena, I do acknowledge the Kurdish diaspora is an integral part of globalisation in Kurdistan.

3.4 ’The War on Terror’

> “We don’t say ’the fall of Saddam’ here. You know, in wars two things can happen: the fall of the capital or the fall of the regime. Now, in Syria the capital has fallen, but the regime has not. Look at Egypt: the regime fell, but not the capital. Here in Iraq, then, both the capital and the regime fell.”
>
> A fourth year private university student

The relations between the United States (and the Global North in general) and Iraq had soured in 1990 and continued to deteriorate during the 1990s and early 2000s. Initially the US policy towards

[73] By diaspora, I mean a very concrete existing social reality as much as a field of stories, meanings, and experiences. 'Diaspora', or a 'diasporic existence', refers to an experience of belonging or a shared past within members of communities or nations in exile or long-distance dispersion. For further elaboration on the term, see James Clifford (1994).

Saddam Hussein's regime was that of containment through no-fly zones and sanctions (e.g. Tripp 2007, pp. 269–270; Yildiz 2007, p. 90). There had been sporadic military engagement between US forces and Iraqi military structures, but plans to depose President Hussein, while they existed, were largely covert. However, following the September 11 terrorist attack in 2001 the United States President George W. Bush had declared a 'War on Terror' and nominated Iraq as part of the 'axis of evil' (the other two being North Korea and the US's long-standing opponent Iran), after which the rhetoric towards Saddam Hussein toughened considerably for the next couple of years. Especially the US and its ally Great Britain were determined to overthrow the Ba'athist regime. Since the defeat of Iraq in 1991, humanitarian concerns and especially disarmament and inspections looking for Iraq's supposed WMDs (weapons of mass destruction) had been a major source of contention and international sabre-rattling in diplomacy and military circles. The US administration had embraced the 'Bush doctrine', formulated by neo-conservative 'hawks' over the last few years, which sought to tame hostile 'rogue states' through pre-emptive aggression, unilateralism, and full-scale invasion. In spite of the fierce criticism of such an approach, the increasingly aggressive US (and British) policy towards Iraq found equally enthusiastic support: Saddam Hussein's regime's brutality was indisputable, and since the destruction caused by 9/11 attacks especially people in certain Northern countries were a lot more receptive towards claims about international terrorism[74]. In late March 2003 air raid sirens were sounded in Baghdad. The Second Gulf War had begun. (Tripp 2007, pp. 267–274; Yildiz 2007, pp. 95–105.)

The Kurds perceived the invasion of the US-led coalition generally positively, a stance for which there was not necessarily a lot of support in many parts of the Middle East and the rest of the world at the time. In fact, they ended up playing a considerable role in the coalition's operations. As Turkey refused to take part in the 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', or give permission to use its lands as a base, the Kurdish cooperation allowed the US-led coalition to open a northern front in addition to attacks launched from the Persian Gulf. To the Turkish state's horror[75], Kurdish peshmerga forces entered into an alliance with the coalition. They also captured Kirkuk, once again, and generally moved towards the areas that Baghdad had previously claimed and forcibly Arabicised. (Tripp 2007; p. 274; Yildiz 2007, pp. 105–115) However, for my study, the most important frontline where

[74] I do not wish to make a statement of the "Americans again" kind (see Friedman 2000a for this discussion). It is nonetheless worthy of attention that the US is home to many of the transnational elites operating at the core of the world-system, or at least an important linchpin in the processes how these political, economic or cultural elites (in trade as well as global politics) meet and do business. It is also at the core of the centralisation of global military capabilities (Arrighi 1999).

[75] Turkish government was vehemently opposed to any political or regional gains the KRG might succeed in obtaining. This was largely because of the fear of what consequences such advancements might have for Turkey's own Kurdish minority. Ankara had even threatened to invade Kurdistan Region. (Yildiz 2007, pp. 105–115) Such 'war within a war' was nonetheless avoided.

the Kurdish troops were engaged in was located in the governorate of Slemani, near the Iranian border. This was where PUK's peshmergas and the US forces confronted in a joint operation Ansar al-Islam, the Kurdish Islamists linked to Al Qaeda, who had taken hold of several villages in the region (Yildiz 2007, p. 105).

The majority of Kurds were, and still are, Muslims. However, for decades there have been frictions of some degree or another between the most conservative religious factions within the society and the most secular elements of the nationalists. McDowall (2004, p. 355) notes how a number of the Sufi[76] sheikhs were collaborating with the Baghdad regime, some of them as *jash* leaders to oppose the left-leaning and secular nationalists (especially PUK). Equally, the aspect of religion was another point of interference for surrounding states: various Islamist factions were already in the 1990s financially supported by Saudi Arabia or Iran (McDowall 2004, p. 380). The first bigger Islamist parliamentary faction in the 1990s appeared when various political Islamic groups joined the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) (ibid.). IMK's support was strongest in areas where PUK, the more liberal of the two leading parties, dominated and the more conservative (or "traditional") alternatives such as KDP were weak (McDowall 2004, p. 386). Such an area was found around Slemani.

IMK had already clashed with PUK around Halabja during the course of the 1990s (McDowall 2004, p. 387). Over time the majority of IMK formed, despite their grievances against the more secular nationalists, a legitimate actor in KRG's politics. However, the 2000s saw the emergence of another faction made up from various more marginal elements of IMK and other Islamist factions, which from the outset had virtually no sympathy for the 'Kurdish cause'. The group which ultimately would assume the name Ansar al-Islam were a socio-politically Taleban-esque faction, allegedly trained in the war against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, who were seeking to violently build a form of conservative, "pure" Islamic governance in Kurdistan. While the leadership was Kurdish, the Kurdish 'Ansars' who had declared a jihad against the KRG establishment were thought to include also non-Kurdish combatants in their ranks. Ansar al-Islam attacked Kurdish politicians, security forces, and ordinary civilians in the eastern parts of the Slemani governorate. (Human Rights Watch 2003; ICG 2003; Yildiz 2007, p. 105.) Their campaign was crushed by the peshmergas together with US troops, and over the course of the 2000s their activities inside Kurdistan Region have become more clandestine. Nonetheless, as I will try to show

[76] Sufism is a broad and varied group of denominations within Islam, usually organised as brotherhoods, which places emphasis on mystical experiences and acts which bring the practitioner closer to God.

in the Chapter 6, their social impact in both Kurdistan Region and the Kurdish diaspora should not be underestimated.

The history of Kurdistan Region, decades marked with poverty and violence, is thoroughly embedded in the social realities of contemporary Slemani. The public space is adorned with pictures of old national heroes and martyrs, and paintings and monuments remembering the suffering of the Kurds. Portraits of political leaders look over offices and teahouses. Many families have lost their close ones to either one or many of the wars that have ravaged the region, and an equal number of families have sent one or many of their kin to safety in Europe. At the same time, many have returned, even students who either fled as children or were born in Europe or the US. To the ethnographer, these biographies open in unexpected situations: a taxi driver might say “oh, from Finland? Is that close to Germany, because my brother fled there?” or a random acquaintance by the mall could remark “University of Tampere? I know the city, I spent 99 days there”.

The deep internal divisions and the socially shared memory of struggle and danger are folded seamlessly into the 2010s, increasingly so because of the continuously uneasy relationship with the Baghdad government, widespread economic crisis, the brutal civil wars around Iraq and Syria, and the violence committed against the Kurds by ISIS and other Sunni insurgents. Students in Slemani make up a generation that was “formed” under Kurdish rule, but they too carry the legacy of uncertainty which, in spite of the promises of stability and prosperity propelled by the oil fields, dissolves into another age pervaded by a sense of emergency.

Picture 4: A shopping centre in Slemani's centre.
(Photograph by Ville Laakkonen)

4. The World in Kurdistan: governance and education

> What is an ordinary day in Slemani like? I went out to buy some handmade stress beads from one of the old greyed men sitting by the fence of the big mosque. On the street, I passed by two physically well-trained, bulky Western men with short-cropped hair. They were wearing Bermuda shorts and tight, short-sleeved shirts. It was obvious they were military trainers, or "security consultants". The Oxfam types (I have seen them around too) would not, in my experience, look like they would excel at commando training grounds. After a while, in order to escape the scorching heat, I side-stepped from the main street into the cooling shadows of a teashop for a cup of intensely flavoured, sugary tea and some bottled water. Standing next to me was a middle-aged Kurdish man in khaki sporting a blue WHO [The UN agency World Health Organisation] vest. After I had conducted my business with one of the beads vendors I went to have lunch and got into a conversation with the man running the kiosk. It turned out he had just fled Syria some months ago.
>
> Back on the main street it is again fashion boutiques, luxury car dealers, and party offices with armed guards. The biggest hotels down the street, those hosting businessmen and elites rather than ordinary vacationing families (or ethnographers), have signs indicating that firearms are prohibited on their premises. A member of staff outside one of these hotels, holding equipment used to check under cars for possible bombs, gave me an intense look as I walked past him. Back at my own accommodation, I was preparing myself to confront the staff about my satellite television problems and tried to remember what the word for an extension cord would be in Swedish.[77]

How is the global world-system instantiated in Kurdistan Region? Despite the Kurdish wishes and dreams to the contrary, Kurdistan Region is still part of the Iraqi state[78]. Thus, I begin this chapter by looking at the Iraqi state as a whole[79], before moving in closer to Kurdistan, because many of the things that can be said about Iraq are equally true for the Kurdish regions too.

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[77] Excerpt from personal field notes, autumn 2014.

[78] Quite a few Western scholars have, already since the 1990s, referred to Kurdistan Region as a '*de facto* state' (e.g. Gunter 1993). I feel it is not an easy statement to make, considering the dependence of KRG on the benevolence of its allies. Nonetheless, after the latest political and military turmoil that has gripped the region, it is interesting to see how this notion transforms over the next couple of years. A further difficulty with the notions of state and sovereignty is offered by scholars who point out that there are numerous recognised states whose level of sovereignty defies the very concept of being sovereign, such as Andorra, Kosovo, and Vatican (e.g. Caspersen 2012, pp. 3–6).

[79] It is not, however, within the scope of this study to elaborate on ethnographic realities outside Kurdistan Region. For an account of the chaos and uncertainty as it is experienced elsewhere in Iraq see for example Al-Mohammad (2012), Al-Mohammad & Peluso (2012) and Juntunen (2011).

In 2005 Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala posited that 'the Iraqi state is not representing Iraq in a globalising world: it is representing the globalising world in Iraq.' (Herring & Rangwala 2005, p. 667). Writing shortly after the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority, established by the US after the destruction of the Ba'athist regime) ceded power to the Iraqi Interim Government in 2004, they argued that post-war debt and foreign reconstruction funds, trans-border informal trade, and local Iraqi socio-economic configurations had shaped (and continued to shape) a very particular, if contingent, globalised neoliberal economy (Herring & Rangwala 2005). A key term for Herring and Rangwala in understanding this dynamic is 'imperial globalisation'. On the one hand, the term makes an explicit reference to the role of the United States as an empire-like entity[80], highlighting the fact that the US not only effectively invaded Iraq but later also had a hand (together with global institutions such as the IMF) in selecting the appropriate Iraqi representatives in local administration, not to mention that a majority of contracts in reconstruction (security, infrastructure, logistics, construction et cetera) were picked up by American companies or transnational companies with major American stakeholders (ibid.). On the other hand, however, it can be seen to describe the flows of the capital itself as well as the practices of non-state powerbrokers, the transnational economic elites, who transcend nation-state borders and retain privatised control over the vast majority of global profits.

However, as Herring and Rangwala rightly point out, looking at the US involvement alone would not help us to fully appreciate the circumstances in post-Ba'athist Iraq. They write about 'decentred globalisation' to refer to all those different actors which shape the socio-economic reality of Iraq (and Kurdistan Region) from below: trans-border informal trade, extra-state networks, transnational organisations, other states[81], and local companies and workers. (ibid.) These forms of trade, both legal and extra-legal, are particularly important when looking at any conflict zones, as Carolyn Nordstrom (2004; 2009), when talking about 'shadow economies', has thoroughly argued.

I would argue that Herring and Rangwala's notion, that the state is representing the world in Iraq and not the other way around, holds equally true some ten years later. Rather than focus on what the US foreign policy doctrines do or have done, one should look at the larger constellations of different

[80] Whether the US actually is an empire is a source of quite a long-standing debate that cuts across political doctrines in a sense that while leftist and other anti-globalisation movements (and other anti-systemic movements, to use the Wallersteinian concept) have accused US politicians and companies of imperialism, similarly neoliberal politicians and commentators have celebrated the US "empire", and in some cases urged the US administration to exercise its "imperial powers" more globally. For an analysis of the empire argument as well as the US foreign policy, see for example David Harvey (2005), and for a critique of the concepts of 'empire' and 'imperialism' in the contemporary global context Dan O'Meara (2006). I personally refrain from using the term 'imperialism' (or 'new imperialism') due to its potential for anachronisms (in relation to, say, the British or Roman Empires), and because its analytical and descriptive dimensions are fairly limited.

[81] Apart from the Global North, especially Iraq's neighbours Iran, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, and obviously the Gulf States.

actors and processes. It is considerably more fruitful to consider how, in spite of the Iraq's Shi'ite regime's emboldened and increasingly authoritarian policies, various foreign state apparatuses, motivated by the global capitalist world-economy of transnational companies and elites, extra-state trade networks, and international governing and advisory bodies, condition the contemporary Iraqi political life, and without doubt continue to do so in the foreseeable future. The situation in Kurdistan Region is in many ways very similar, despite its relative internal stability. How did this reality came into being, especially in the view of the workings of the world-system?

4.1 Global trade, global governance

"If you want to change the [political] system, you're forced to leave."

A recent public university graduate

It is perhaps reasonable to suggest that the US-led invasion to Iraq was primarily motivated by the need to guard the interests of the core in the oil-rich region and countering the anti-US influence fostered by both Iraq and the neighbouring Iran. The Ba'athist state had, despite the heavy sanctions, risen back to its feet by the early 2000s, and centred even more on its president and his coterie. (Tripp 2007, pp. 259–270.) After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and armed forces, the international community, led by the US and the British, sought to implant all the pillars of liberal democratic rule in Iraq: the rule of law, the principles of good governance, and an all-inclusive central administration with remarkable amount of reconstruction funds at its disposal.

The background against which this new dawn for the peoples of Iraq was to be realised was not given too much thought: a state which was artificial since the beginning. Little actual consideration was given to decades of violent totalitarian rule in which also foreign states had interfered in different ways. In hindsight it is easy to say that members of the coalition, as well as various international organisations, did not understand the nature of the different and separate societies within Iraq, forcibly knit together by fear, which were largely "tribalised" in a sense that the claustrophobia of the Ba'athist state had led to people turning more and more to social groupings they could identify with and networks they could trust[82]. As will be discussed later in this chapter, for the Kurds this factional reality meant family and political party networks above anything else.

[82] Tripp (2007, pp. 259–267) argues that the core of the Ba'athist regime, Saddam Hussein's coterie, was itself in fact a 'shadow state', which functioned both inside and outside of the formal state structures and was motivated by both personal loyalty and fear of President Hussein's retribution.

Post-Ba'athist reintegration

The KRG, much to the annoyance of many others in the region, managed to secure a considerable amount of power to itself in the aftermath of the Ba'athist regime's fall. As the new central government was established after successive 'provisional' and 'interim' governing bodies, both the Iraqi president and the foreign minister were prominent Kurdish politicians, PUK's founder and leader Jalal Talabani[83] and KDP veteran Hoshyar Zebari respectively. The peshmergas attained a legitimate status as formal armed forces while their duties were reserved exclusively to protecting the Kurds or Kurdish-controlled areas. KRG leadership got ultimately into a position where no major constitutional decisions could be made without their consent. To an extent, the situation was, as was noted a few years ago, that the 'erstwhile kings of the mountains, Iraqi Kurdish parties have become kingmakers in Baghdad' (Hiltermann 2008, p. 6).

Military strategy aside, there is another dimension to the Global North – Kurdish cooperation. When analysing the 'liberal peace'; connections between development agencies, humanitarian aid, conflict resolution, and military involvement in the 'new wars', Mark R. Duffield has noted that over the last few decades regional and internal conflicts have come to dominate, instead of wars between nation-states. At the same time, the relationship between conflict and poverty has become the central focus of development and security discourses. Furthermore, as the result of the reinvention of development as conflict resolution, the 'poor' (or those framed as poor), erstwhile proxies in the wars of the Cold War, have been increasingly incorporated as strategic allies in the projects to transform entire societies. (2001, pp. 113–135). I would argue that as much as internal and external violence in Iraq prior to 2003 invasion, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, was already very much a 'new war', the Kurdistan Region as a more or less separate and economically struggling region of Iraq represents the 'poor' in Duffield's sense of the word. More importantly, while people in other conflict zones and under different totalitarian regimes might be compelled to follow leaders the Global North (i.e. the core in world-systems' terms) sees unfit or out of line (ibid.), the Kurdistan Front's leadership, once rugged nationalist idealists, had already been cultivated in the lobbying circles of Europe and the US, and yet remained popular among the Kurdish population. In other words, the Kurds were an ideal ally for building a new (neo)liberal Iraq.

[83] To this day, the largely ceremonial post of the president of Iraq is reserved for the Kurds. Current Iraqi president is Mam Jalal's ('Uncle Jalal', as he is known in Slemani) fellow PUK member Fuad Massum, who has previously served in several prominent positions within both the KRG and the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi administration.

However, I would argue that Kurdistan Region's integration as a separate entity to the world-system did not begin with the fall of Saddam Hussein. First of all, as Bozarslan (2014) notes, the majority of wars and upheavals since 1979 in the region have had direct impact on Kurdish realities too. These wars have always had something to do with the global world-economy, in one way or another. Secondly, the integration's grass roots foundations were laid in the 1990s, not only over the course of the political warm-up to war, but also during the sanctions, trade embargo, as well as the Oil-for-Food program.

To survive economically, individuals and communities, as well as the political party structures, were often forced to engage in smuggling and cross-border trade. Unregulated or black-market trade exceeded formal economy in importance and volume by 1996 (McDowall 2004, p. 392). If, as Michiel Leezenberg (2005, pp. 635–636) argues following Charles Tilly (1986), the difference between states and criminal gangs is 'not in what they are doing, but in whether they are perceived as having the right to do it', then something along the same lines can be said of legal or regulated and extra-legal or unregulated trade. As Nordstrom (2004) notes, the "extra" in extra-legal is difficult to point out anyway, when conflict zones connect everything from medical trade or weapons manufacturing to the markets of raw natural resources and electronics, and often at one point or another perfectly legal businesses[84]. I would argue that the effects, in terms of the capitalist world-economy, are quite similarin both cases: the vast majority of the profits go to the elites, and a sufficient amount of people in various cadre and middle class positions benefit economically enough to lend their support to the system. Equally, those in less advantageous positions feel compelled to engage in identical activities, for instance Yildiz (2007, p. 75) notes that during the 1990s, as Baghdad deliberately offered a higher price for wheat than KRG, many local Kurdish farmers actually smuggled their crops southward.

In Kurdistan Region, many of the elites who controlled the cross-border trade and illegal smuggling of oil are still in power. For example, KDP is said to have received most of the revenues coming from extra-legal trade across the border to Turkey (e.g. McDowall 2004, pp. 389–390), with President Barzani's nephew and current KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani being in control of the black market oil revenues (Leezenberg 2005, p. 638). It is important to remember, however, that the extra-legal, or "shadowy" trade did not come into being out of low ethical standards or greed, but rather as a necessity. For instance Kurdistan's, and probably the whole Iraq's, only billionaire

[84] The case of European and US companies' connection to Iraq's chemical weapons program would be a good example in Kurdistan Region's case.

Faruk Rasool[85], founder of AsiaCell, laid the foundations of his telecommunications empire by smuggling cell phones to Kurdistan at the time when Saddam Hussein had banned them altogether (Cuadros 2013). The point is, instead, that in the post-World War I era this type of economical arrangement was the first time when the Kurds in Iraq were conducting major scale trade separately from the central government, and that the same leaders, as well as very much the same structures, are still in place.

How does the world-system, specifically as it is operated from the core, function in Kurdistan Region? Mariellaa Pandolfi (2010, p. 155) argues that Western involvement in the Balkans has transformed from 'temporary state of intervention' (to prevent genocide) to a condition of 'permanent transition', where the terms 'emergency' and 'long-term' are not contradictory apparatuses. She writes:

'[t]he emergency, the need to act now, −punishing the bad guys and aiding the victims− produces a state of exception that entails the partial abrogation of strategic, economic, and moral standards. From communism to liberalism, from war to peace, from ethnic-religious conflict to cosmopolitanism, in an endless permutation of violence, where once emergency roamed, now postemergency and permanent transition dwell.' (ibid.)

The actors within a 'state of emergency', a collective of transnational and, oddly enough, "sovereign" actors in itself within an otherwise sovereign geographical location (in Paldolfi's case Bosnia and Kosovo, in my case Kurdistan Region), can only legitimately reproduce and exert their influence over matters as long as the emergency persists. This is established through a chain of micro-emergencies, for instance individual military operations and humanitarian operations, where the transnational security and humanitarian apparatus (Duffield's 'liberal peace', also referred to these days as 'conflict management') has a specific toolkit for each occasion (Pandolfi 2010). These mechanisms are evident in Kurdistan Region. It began with a humanitarian intervention ('Operation Safe Haven'), transformed into a military cooperation ('Operation Iraqi Freedom'), and gradually dissolved into hundreds of reconstruction and aid projects. Obviously, there has been the need for international organisations, transnational companies, NGOs, and external states to be involved in Kurdistan Region. The point I am trying to make here is that we can establish a pattern in the terms and timing of their involvement, where the infusion of global economic and geopolitical concerns

[85] Faruk Rasool, from Slemani, is a well-known Kurdish self-made man. According to his company's website (http://www.farukholding.com), he controls numerous businesses in diverse fields such as telecommunications, construction, cement and steel industry, real estate, pharmaceuticals and car trading. He is also member of the board of trustees at the American University of Iraq, Slemani.

can be explicated. At the same time, freedom from the authoritarian and genocidal centralist regime has been transformed into a continuous state of emergency. This is a point which is seldom considered in connection to Southern Kurdistan.

It is interesting, that with the current stage of crisis in Iraq, the international community has been vocal in its vows to preserve Iraq's 'territorial integrity'. It is the same political stance which has been proclaimed continuously since the 1980s. Contradictorily, in spite of a state apparatus which has been hostile to the interests and goals of the US and its allies, Iraq has been nevertheless the centre of the Global North's power in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein was a threat which legitimised the presence of US troops in the Persian Gulf. Later on it was sectarian brutality and post-invasion terror which guaranteed the need for international community's involvement. Most recently the civil war in Syria and the subsequent rise of ISIS have strengthened these same concerns. I would argue that ironically it is precisely those forces which are framed to threat Iraqi states' territorial integrity, most importantly sectarianism and separatism, which are actually this integrity's only guarantee. A major point in Pandolfi's (2010) argument is how the political processes of inclusion and exclusion construct a very particular status for Bosnia and Kosovo. The same can be said of Kurdistan Region. On the one hand, they are welcomed as an ally, portrayed in European and US media as the vanguard against terrorism, and on the other hand, they are excluded from the anti-ISIS coalition's meetings. States in the Global North open consulates and establish diplomatic relations with the KRG, arrange trade deals and deliver weapons and ammunition, but proclaim Iraq's territorial integrity as the single highest priority. Carrot and stick. The markets for construction and oil companies, consumer goods, and security and intelligence firms flourish.

In Kurdistan Region at the helm of its reintegration have been a group of individuals and communities which are embedded in a very particular political networks within the formal political structures. Interestingly, it would seem like these networks are structurally quite similar, if far less oppressive and destructive, than what Tripp (2007, pp. 259–267; as referred to above) identified as the 'shadow state' in Iraqi politics during the 1990s and early 2000s. Its economic roots have been discussed already, but its political foundations and functions are important here, because they directly relate to the uncertainty and discontent many of my interlocutors felt.

The elites in Kurdistan Region have in many ways been connected to and shaped by party politics. This is especially the case with KDP and PUK. Organising and operating a resistance movement obviously required a lot of secrecy in politics, military operations, and financial matters. I would even argue that it was perhaps the only way to work against the Ba'athist state. Secrecy requires

trust and this trust was established through networks of party affiliation, kinship, and patronage. Political power in Kurdistan has traditionally been personified (e.g. Bruinessen 1992; McDowall 2004), perhaps due to its marginalised position, and the already centralised party leadership (Masoud Barzani for KDP and Jalal Talabani for PUK) courted in turn with local leaders and landowners for support. During my fieldwork, my friends would tell me how the political support of social groupings connected to a particular landowner or local notable used to be bought and bargained for. This history of "buying" chunks of votes rather than persuading individual voters has further strengthened the corporate and party-political nature of the political sphere. Similarly, an unemployed fresh graduate complained to me that even when he was applying to a very manual, low-skilled position, the prospective employer told him to go to negotiatiate the employment at the local PUK office first.

Parties, especially KDP and PUK, have thus become sprawling and corporate organisations which have a stake in virtually every aspect of social and political life[86]. Structures of kinship and patronage were folded into the party organisations' everyday functions. In the shadow of continuous risk of violent conflict party politics, political ambitions, land use disputes, economics, personal grievances, and nationalist resistance became infused into a very particular form of social organisation. (See for example McDowall 2004, pp. 385 – 386.) This historical background has obvious implications for present-day Kurdistan Region. While in the 1990s, according to McDowall's (2004, p. 380) estimate, merely some 20 percent of Kurds in the region claimed tribal identity, certain families and tribal affiliations still carry weight. Certain names, most visible examples being Barzani and Talabani, regularly mark political influence. Political histories, especially those connected to party politics, structure governance and the justice system. Market surplus often flows along these same lines.[87]

The global world-system, its expansive nature and its actors at the core, has for its part been involved in enforcing this configuration of Kurdish political life. I have already noted how the KDP and PUK leadership was ideal for cooperation in 2003. I find it crucial how, without anyone barely noticing, the nationalist Kurdistan Front, mauled by wars and held on a chokehold by surrounding political regimes, gradually learned an approach to global politics which finally won the trust of the Global North, most importantly the trust of the US and Great Britain. It is noteworthy how many successive administrations there have been in the US and Britain, how the Cold War went on until

[86] This aspect of higher education is discussed in detail below.

[87] This element of Kurdistan Region's politics, and its connection to economy and higher education, is analysed later in connection with the concept of *wasta*.

eventually ending with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and how at the same time the KDP and PUK leaderships have remained the same.

The Kurdish elites of the "old world" have been accompanied by the elites of the new neoliberal markets, but often these two are the same, or at least their relationship to one another is remarkably symbiotic. Landownership and extra-legal cross-border trade have been replaced by media empires, oil industry, and construction businesses. Political parties control the majority of the media outlets and run their administrations more or less like they did decades ago. Interestingly, the centrist liberal Gorran, which for many of my student acquaintances heralded a current of change in its anti-corruption program, was actually formed by politicians who split from PUK (which in turn split from the KDP in the 1970s). The party leader, Nawshirwan Mustafa, is an old peshmerga commander and ex-member of the PUK political bureau who took the political battle to where it was actually waged: he formed what is now one of the major media corporations in Kurdistan Region, the Wusha Corporation.

The Kurdish elites have become entrenched in a continuous state of emergency and uncertainty. The sense of emergency persists, only the face its has been replaced by terrorism, refugee crisis, and oil markets. The Kurdish elites have changed their mountain enclaves to palaces and military training has moved from hidden camps to massive barracks and academies. Centralist, heavily bureaucratic administration is in many respects mimetic to the one imposed on society during the Ba'athist era. Political dissent is only begrudgingly tolerated. Credible alternatives are difficult to formulate, when the very foundations of the fragile autonomy seem to be under attack at all times. But as Nordstrom (2004; 2009) points out, conflict and war are also beneficial to some. This is also where the line between legal and illegal, as well as local and global, becomes blurred. Locally there are social groupings which benefit from the enterprise which the need for either reconstruction or protection generates. Globally, somewhere, someone has to manufacture the highly sophisticated weaponry, medical supplies, and technologies which the state of emergency requires. These products have to be marketed and transported and they, in turn, support enterprises somewhere else. These interconnections are what Nordstrom (2009) calls 'fault lines', flowing from the epicentre of conflict along political, economic, and ethical relations and interests.

Oil

A big catalyst for Kurdistan's integration is obviously oil. After the World War I it was of major interest to the British (e.g. McDowall 2004, p. 135; 143) and the oil-rich Mosul vilayet had been a main point of contention for the British and the Turkish (McDowall 2004, p. 143). As King notes (2008, p. 330), oil was a deciding factor as new states were drawn on the map after the World War I. It also continued to do so after the independence of the Iraqi state. Similarly, it has carried on playing a major political role throughout the 20th century. In the aftermath of the 2003 war, as Kurdistan Region became formally acknowledged as a largely autonomous region within the Iraqi federation, numerous foreign oil companies have flocked into the Kurdish lands and made several new discoveries. Oil is important here, not only because it is obviously one of the elements which has facilitated a good number of social upheavals as well as military catastrophes in and around Kurdistan Region, but because it is of particular relevance in connection with the question why Kurdistan is a periphery.

A good number of works by social scientists from different theoretical focuses I make reference to in this study[88] point out directly or indirectly that in the global world-economy communities, societies or nations rarely achieve prosperity or stability due to their "inherent" and "natural" "industriousness" or "innovativeness", but rather by virtue of their relative position in the overarching relations of global power, hierarchy, and economic dominance. Therefore, in spite of its oil reserves, Kurdistan Region has relatively little say in global matters. Generally looking at the world-system, economist Samir Amin has made some interesting observations, which can be applied to understanding Kurdistan Region's position too. According to Amin (2014, pp. 4–5), the core (or 'centre' in his words) maintain their dominant position through five monopolies: (I) technological monopoly, (II) control over the worldwide financial markets, (III) monopolistic access to planet's natural resources, (IV) media and communication monopoly, and (V) monopoly over the weapons of mass destruction. Thus, states and their transnational economic elites which dominate the world-system are the states which can afford to spend in technological superiority (including military technology), and by and large control how and where global capital can flow. The core successfully claims access to natural resources everywhere around the world while limiting the level of their exploitation for others. Power over media and communication guarantees that these institutions can be manipulated. Finally, there are the weapons of mass destruction (partly connected with technology) over which, despite of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, still the US

[88] It is obvious in the works within the world-system paradigm such as Amin (2000 & 2014) and Wallerstein (1974a & 2004), but also discernible from writings on institutionalised violence and inequality (e.g. Bourgois 2009; Farmer 2004; Graber 2012) as well as historiography about Kurdistan (e.g. McDowall 2004; Hardi 2013).

and its allies retain effective control. As Amin notes (2000, pp. 601–602; 2014, p. 5), these five monopolies effectively deter industrialising, or newly reintegrating, societies from attaining a more central position or developing core-like production. Such 'development' would be threatening to the world-system's balance of power based on the existing axial division of labour.

It is apparent that what Kurdistan Region does not possess, despite the tendency towards further industrialisation and KRG's commitment to alliance[89] with states at the core, is the actual access to any of these Amin's five monopolies. The region is, however, very much connected to the aims and needs of the core states. This fact was exemplified by the speed with which international assistance was mobilised in the Global North as ISIS's combatants came within only tens of kilometres from the capital Hewler. Another point is that the peshmerga forces undeniably needed the assistance, too, as, despite their status as the formal armed forces of the region, the majority of their military technology was largely at the same level it used to be during the guerrilla war against Saddam Hussein's regime, a detail which brings us straight back to the monopolies I and V outlined by Amin.

In the world-economy oil, together with some other raw natural resources, is the only commodity exported out of Kurdistan Region. In many parts of the Kurdish-controlled areas infrastructure such as roads are in a great condition in the proximity of the oil production facilities while the dominantly agricultural or rural parts are still in a state of neglect. Notwithstanding wheat and few locally consumed agricultural products, virtually everything is imported. A look at shops in Slemani, from corner kiosks and bazaar to shopping malls, is telling: cheese from Saudi Arabia, toiletries from United Arab Emirates, nuts and kernels from Lebanon, olives and cement from Turkey, cars from Japan and the US, the list goes on. The same goes for technology. Some of the students that attended a group interview I held joked "you make them, we use them – that's the problem"[90], as we were comparing our mobile phones and I took out my old Finnish Nokia. Once again, looking at oil is revealing: as the region has no technology to refine the oil pumped out of its soil, it is by and large impossible to monopolise the production even relatively, which further

[89] I use the term 'alliance' deliberately, but carefully. I base my use of the term first and foremost on fact that in 2003 peshmergas and US forces carried out military operations together as a part of the US-led coalitions northern front. Similarly, and perhaps as much as a sign of quilt because of what happened in the previous decades as an act of gratitude (and to prevent the "war within a war"), the US administration was willing to support Kurdish aspirations over the NATO member Turkey's political interests, as well as Kurdish claims in the formation of the new Iraqi administration. Gratitude, or alliance, has its limits nonetheless. The most recent event to cast doubt on this alliance is the fact that the Kurds were excluded from the anti-ISIS coalition meeting which took place in January 2015 in London (see Kurdistan Region Presidency January 22, 2015). Incidentally, Turkey, which is internationally criticised for its unwillingness to join the fight against ISIS, was invited. It would seem like the Kurdish–US alliance, if it ultimately is an alliance at all, is one of those alliances where one party stands to gain more than the other.

[90] A rather perceptive remark, considering that power relations and economic hierarchies are elementary in the manufacture and trade in technology too. This is something that is still rarely considered. (E.g. Hornborg 2014).

enforces the region's production's confinement into a peripheral position in the capitalist world-system.

Nonetheless, there have been attempts by the Kurdish government to improve the region's relative position in the world-economy. Especially since the 2010s the distribution of oil revenues has been a point of fierce debate between the KRG and the Iraqi central government as Kurdish authorities increasingly began to export oil drilled in the region directly through Turkish ports. Iraqi government objected and claimed the practice to be unconstitutional, that all revenues should be centrally administered through Baghdad. It also threatened foreign companies who did not abide by its will. (See for example The Chemical Engineer July 2012 & February 2013.)

The year 2014 saw the oil debate intensifying with an increasingly international focus. Over the course of my fieldwork, the issue was fiercely debated in the Iraqi parliament, with news about Baghdad threatening foreign companies and states with lawsuits seemingly appearing daily. At the same time tankers loaded with KRG oil were stuck on the seas, as their legal status was internationally disputed. Baghdad had already withheld KRG's share of the federal budget and public sector struggled to pay its employees' salaries. During my first trip to Slemani, the region was yet to have a new parliament as the negotiations had been in a virtual deadlock since the September 2013 elections, which further increased the angriness and the uncertainty caused by the delay of salaries. People seemed to be tired of the very nature of local political processes, yet at the same time they were ready to jump into heated conversations about politics at every possible opportunity. The everyday rumour mill was overheating: someone had heard the peshmergas would be receiving their salaries next, others were betting on the civil servants at one of the ministries. Before my arrival in late March, Slemani had already seen strikes by the Teacher's Union (Kurd Net February 3, 2014a) and the public hospital staff (Millet Press January 17, 2014). In general the feelings towards the whole crisis were ambiguous, as the following discussion I had with a few students shows:

> **Man 1:** Because we do not live in our own home [an independent state], our leaders wouldn't like to hand in the revenues to the Iraqi government. I mean, why would you give up something that's yours? You know, I'm just trying to understand why this has happened. On the other hand, the Iraqi government gave our share, the 17 percent, and now they stopped everything all of a sudden. Why would we have to share with them but not the other way around?

Man 2: You have to make decisions. If you are with the Iraqi government you have to be straight with them and send all the revenues to the Iraqi government. Then you'll your get your share, the 17 percent. And, if you decide that you're not with the Iraqi government, let us then be properly separated…

Man 3: And then our government shouldn't expect money from them either.

Man 2: …yeah, don't take money from them either.

Man 4: I think one argument is that why would we give them money if it goes to Iran anyway [a reference to Baghdad's Shi'ite leaders' presumed connections to the Iranian authorities]?

Woman 1: One of the reasons for all the shady dealings is that from the 17 percent the KRG should get, they [Iraqi government] send yearly about 10 percent. They always try to find some reasons to cut our share of the budget. And in return our leaders do the same. But none of them, I guess, actually want this kind of a conflict. Instead, they're are all victims from their own point of view.

The conversation above highlights several aspects of the discussions and interviews I would have with the students. First is the deep mistrust, with Baghdad, on the one hand, and KRG, on the other. Second is the acknowledgement of foreign interference, real or imagined, into both Kurdish and Iraqi affairs. Thirdly, nobody would propose a practical solution to the problem – it was as if they felt they had no part in the governance of KRG or Iraq anyway[91].

4.2 Higher education

"I began my studies without knowing anything about my subject. It was just my fate."

A third year public university student

[91] The most radical of my acquaintances would, lowering their voice, even confess that nothing short of a revolution would ever bring them back to politics.

The higher education system in many parts of Iraq was relatively good for a long time, until it collapsed during its isolation. This erosion can be attributed to two major elements: Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist administration and the international sanctions regime. (E.g. Kaghed & Dezaye 2009). After 2003 a considerable amount of resources has been directed in Kurdistan Region to revive, and recreate, its education system. Over the course of last 5–10 years a good number of new campuses and universities have been established, and similarly old campuses have received major investments in facilities and computer technology. University studies are also supported financially by the KRG. The Regional administration, especially the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, has facilitated several international conferences and needs assessments, which have resulted in systems which aim at the implementation of international quality assurance strategies and auditing. With conferences in London, needs assessment conducted by the University of Exeter[92], and the establishment of private universities such as American Universities in Slemani and Dohuk, the reconstruction of Kurdistan Region's higher education has received considerable support and direction from the Anglo-American academia. (ibid.) Notable KRG politicians have played an important role too: Nechirvan Barzani, the current prime minister of KRG, has for example supported the Exeter Centre for Kurdish Studies by providing scholarships, and he was behind the establishment of University of Kurdistan-Hawler (Whitney 2008, p. 56). His cousin Masrour is the chairman of the board of trustees at the American University in Dohuk, while veteran PUK politician and former prime minister (and former deputy prime minister of Iraq) Barham Salih holds a similar position at the American University in Slemani.

According to one of the university lecturers I was acquainted with, many of the changes have been positive. Facilities and teaching resources had improved. Some of the quality assurance strategies sought to redress issues which were really problematic, such as the fact that there had been no incentives to academic work (for instance academic merits, workload, or publishing were not compensated financially), which had resulted in many lecturers feeling completely indifferent towards their work. I got the feeling that the higher education system's interconnectedness with the political structures still resulted in shady practices regarding publishing and tenure appointments, but my friend told me that there was a points-based system to monitor university staff for example in terms research publications, public appearances, and conference attendance.

[92] University of Exeter also has Centre for Kurdish Studies. Its initial funding was provided by Ibrahim Ahmad Foundation, charity established by the poet and politician Ibrahim Ahmad's family. (e.g. University of Exeter Centre for Kurdish Studies Website) Ibrahim Ahmad was one of the founders of PUK. His daughter Hero is the wife of PUK leader and former Iraqi president Jalal Talabani.

To appreciate the scale of these transformations, and the possible ambiguities they entail, we have to look at how the situation unravelled according to the students' own experience. One important thing is to consider what the gaps between them and their parents are. While the "old guard" currently in power received their schooling in a very good, established academic surroundings, where global student movements, intellectual debates and arts were observed to a much higher degree, the present-day students had been born during the double-sanctions as the citizens of an entity which was not even formally recognised. For example, I was told that since the 1990s there was little education in languages (and very few would want to study Arabic, for instance – a stance that is still very much alive). There is a noticeable gap between the "old guard" who grew up at the heyday of international student activism and the new generation who are educated in a system that has to be virtually reconstructed from the scratch. On the other hand, majority of the students in public universities I talked with were the first in their family to attend higher education. If any of their parents had been to university, it would be the fathers so for the female students it was even a bigger change.

Students valued the new knowledge they could learn, a point which is very important in regard to their relationship to religion, as I will be discussing later. Yet, they noted with some agony how the resources to study, gain knowledge, and ultimately realise their potential were still unevenly distributed. The most striking difference was between students at private universities and public universities. During group interviews and private conversations, the private university students remained a lot more optimistic. Granted, they perceived corruption around them, and especially those who had moved in from elsewhere (for instance Europe, or Baghdad) might consider life in Slemani to be dull and restricted. Nevertheless, they often had a vision of how they could contribute in the society and displayed a lot less uncertainty about their future. On the other hand, many of the public university students I talked with, while they were as perceptive as their peers at private universities, remained pessimistic about their future, and noticeably angrier about the current situation in the region. While private university students often had access to textbooks and used for example Moodle and Turnitin[93] routinely, public university students could sometimes only get photocopies of lecture notes. It is interesting that when religious piety and the need for the protection of morals were asserted, it was done by students from public universities, even if there were religious students in private universities too.

As I will discuss later, the students at public universities were placed in various universities and departments according to their baccalaureate marks. This was a harsh game, where the usually

[93] Moodle is an online learning platform and Turnitin is a plagiarism detection software.

malleable social structures once again became those administered by the opaque centralist state bureaucracy. As I talked with a group of students majoring in finance and economics related subjects, it turned out very few of them had actually wanted to pursue this particular academic path. A woman told me “it was compulsory. The government assigned me. You see, I would’ve loved to study Kurdish language and literature instead.” Another woman chimed in by saying that the department and the course had been her seventh choice (students generally had to list fifteen choices in their application) but “as you can see, here I am. I’m trying to adjust to the thought but not quite feeling comfortable. I’ve been working for long in a completely different field, but I figured that I needed a backup plan, something that I can rely on if I lose my job, some kind of a certificate.”

In fact, students had already made an important choice which would define their possibilities in terms of pursuing an academic degree. On their tenth year in school students in Kurdistan Region have to choose between natural sciences or humanities specialisation. Those who went for the latter would basically be exempt from any natural sciences degrees at the later stage, while those within the natural sciences background could in theory choose from a lot wider spectrum of possible university courses. Obviously, this would have further implications later in terms of employment and also restrict further postgraduate study choices in the public university system. To me it looked like that while the public sector was committed to offer a certain amount of jobs to fresh graduates, it was done with a very particular system of educational engineering which fashioned very particular types of obedient subjects to future civil service. Two students enforced this perception. A man told me in a particularly fatalistic manner that “luck defines your fate. If you have a problem with your baccalaureates, then everything's gone. You know, you're gonna lose a lot of opportunities, because your student record and your marks define who you are and what are your choices.” A female student said her dream had always been to study medicine, but “I waited and waited, and ultimately got nowhere. When I reached twelfth year at school, I got sick and because of that I got lower grades so I ended up here. I feel okay with what I am doing nowadays, but I’m still dying to be a medical student.”

One final point I wish to raise here regarding the higher education is the distinct connection it has to the global world-system. There is a kind of double-ambiguity which is most visible in the private university business. On the one hand, they have the educational resources the public universities rarely do, and thus are equally desirable (and useful) to even students who maintain scepticism towards the level of foreign involvement in Kurdistan Region. Likewise, the involvement of foreign educational industry is desirable to the KRG administration, because such entrepreneurs without

doubt both help in reconstructing a credible educational system and form links to international organisations and companies. Foreign lecturers may well sincerely care for their students, and see their work as something resembling humanitarian development (Whitney 2008 is an excellent example of this approach).

On the other hand, it is another arena of world-systemic expansion, which reproduces the North-South dependency structure so strikingly manifest in Kurdistan[94]. That transnational elites as well as local power-holders are so deeply involved in their establishment and functioning mirrors this aspect. The system, which is prevalent in private education but noticeable in public universities as well, has an inherent logic of market standardisation and measurement, which reduces those involved into production units: I would hear students stating that they were attending university only for the degree certificate (an attitude exacerbated in public universities by the fact that they may have had little choice over their major subjects) as well as lecturers mourning that the system was just producing degrees and not educating. It is the neoliberal state-led politics of auditing and accounting, which imposes the logic and vocabulary of private business administration to areas which generally operate by different premises and goals, such as education, social service, healthcare et cetera (see Shore & Wright 2000 in the British context).

[94] King argues (2014, p. 170), that the American University of Beirut 'simultaneously taught Arab young people in the American ways while serving as a focal point for Arab rebellion against Western control'. It is of course possible that similar twin role is or will be emerging in American universities in Kurdistan Region.

Picture 5: A lecture hall at the Dukan Technical Institute
(Photograph by Ville Laakkonen)

5. Burning certificates: studying in uncertainty

> Why are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, rather than as problems of inequality, exploitation or injustice?[95]

Given the history of the region, what are the conditions of studying in Slemani and the Kurdistan Region in general? The question quoted above, and proposed by Slavoj Žižek, has wide-reaching implications, also in the context of Kurdistan Region and the whole Middle East. His answer is that the concept of culture has been operationalised and politicised to account for a variety of social phenomena, especially violence, instead of seeking to identify and redress their actual, often socio-economic, roots. Political differences are naturalised and neutralised into 'cultural' differences. (Žižek 2008, p. 119) Similarly, what I observed on Slemani's campuses, namely dissent and anger which are sometimes expressed in the tendency for religious self-fashioning and reform, are not created by a generational gap (the "ungrateful" and "spoiled" youth versus their hard-working parents) or the effect of radical religious institutions, but rather result from a very particular social reality where different configurations of power, hierarchies, economy, culture and religion are present. Likewise, that some students have formed a religious conviction which goes against the mainstream Kurdish (and Western) sentiment has more to do with the histories and the circumstances I have outlined in the previous chapters than with some "nature" of Islam or the Middle East.

In my opinion, what characterises the student experience (especially those trained in public universities) in Slemani best is the all-pervasive sense of uncertainty and emergency. It is a sense of the limits and dangers, actual or potential, by which the students orient and reorient towards their future. This sense operates on three interconnected levels: uncertainty about the economic situation (both personally and regionally), uncertainty caused by violence (both internal and external to Kurdistan), and finally uncertainty about one's status in the social surroundings the students inhabit. My central argument is that this sense of uncertainty and emergency, together with a perception that the local socio-political structures have not met the students' expectations, catalyse an exploration into new socio-cultural forms of taking control of the adverse circumstances. One of these forms is religiosity which, by connecting with global religious flows and debates, transcends the local and

[95] Slavoj Žižek *Violence: six sideways reflections* (2008, p. 119).

paves way for subjectivity which simultaneously constructs both a sovereignty *in* the globalised world and a meaningful interaction *with* it.

5.1 Economic uncertainty

> For all of us, in my opinion, the standards of living are much more important than following your aspirations. Personally, I sacrificed my preferences to get something I could live on.
>
> A third year business student

Economic uncertainty is caused by several factors. As mentioned before, the dispute over oil revenues between Kurdistan Regional Government and the central Iraqi government in Baghdad led to the latter freezing Kurdistan Region's share of the country's federal budget. Effectively, this meant that a lot of the public services faced severe economic difficulties and public sector employees (constituting a vast majority of Kurdistan's workforce: civil servants, teachers, lecturers, law enforcers, health care professionals et cetera) were soon without their salaries. During my first visit in March–April public sector could afford to pay salaries approximately every two months. On my second field trip in September–October the salaries were paid only every three months. KRG was struggling to pay its employees and offer work to fresh graduates, many already married in their early 20s. The situation was exacerbated by the war against ISIS, which had begun by the time of my second fieldtrip, and the well over a million displaced people from Iraq and Syria who sought refuge within KRG's borders.

In April 2014, during the provincial election campaigns and at the time of my first stay in Slemani, fifty frustrated university graduates burned their degree certificates in the town of Halabja around an hour's drive away. Interviewed by KNNC (April 10, 2014a), the graduates' spokespersons stated they would burn their voter cards next, and if their demands were not met, they threatened to torch their identity cards and passports too. The protest was their way of saying "we are nothing to the government, we have no future". The strongly symbolic act was carried out to protest against favouritism and partiality perceived to be exercised by government officials in charge of human resources and recruitment in the public sector. According to the protesters, only those with connctions of the right kind would ever find employment. (ibid.)

Wasta

It is not, to my understanding, an exaggeration to suggest that the protesting students' concerns were largely accurate. Unemployment is currently plaguing Kurdistan Region, and what few graduate entry-level jobs there are in the public sector, they seem to be often allocated along the lines of a system of patronage networks particular to Kurdistan Region, called *wasta*[96]. *Wasta* could be interpreted as a parallel to patron–client networks traditionally held as characteristic of Middle Eastern cultures. It could also be compared to *blat*, an 'economy of favours' prevalent in Soviet and post-Soviet surroundings (Ledeneva 1998). Mostly, and often by Kurds themselves[97], it is simply referred to as nepotism and corruption. To illustrate *wasta* in practice, let me recount an anecdote I heard and recorded in my field notes:

> As new residence complexes are being built, a system of reservations is set up for people wishing to move in once the constructions are finished. To retain their rights to the flats, prospective residents pay monthly a certain sum of money, often hundreds of US dollars. It is not uncommon, however, that the schedule set for the construction project will be delayed. Sometimes there might be genuine hardships, as one might expect in such volatile surroundings, but other times the construction plans may have been too ambitious since the beginning, or other times the whole project has been set up simply to siphon off funding for some other endeavor, business or personal.
>
> A man in his late thirties had been paying for a flat under construction for quite some time. The flat was supposed to be the future home for him and his family and the construction project was way behind schedule. He confronted the constructor about the delay and the constructor said the time set in the contract meant the days actually spent working at the site and holidays were not included. The man was not satisfied with the explanation and went on to file a complaint at the official administering such construction projects. The government official who happened to be an acquaintance of the constructor (perhaps related through marriage), and without doubt subsidised his low salary with payments resulting from good construction deals, said that indeed holidays are excluded from the set timeframe. The man added, too, that in fact whatever delay there was had taken place because of last season's bad weather which prevented the work from carrying on. The family never moved to the flat.

[96] The word itself, *wasta*, is Arabic but several of my Kurdish friends used it as they would use the term *Daesh* for ISIS.

[97] Many of my interlocutors complained about rampant corruption. Often the students I talked with claimed it was one of the biggest obstacles in Kurdistan Region's growth towards a higher degree of stability. This statement, and explicitly in reference to *wasta*, was echoed by a number of professionals (academics, engineers) I was acquainted with.

Yet, dismissing *wasta* simply as corruption would not appreciate its depth and functioning in Kurdistan Region's social life. Though not using the term *wasta*, Diane E. King (2014) has written rather extensively about the patronage networks in Kurdistan Region. While her experiences are often from rural Kurdistan, and thus paint a distinctly different picture of Kurdish society, some of her arguments are important to my analysis as well. To King, characteristic of patron-client networks in Kurdistan is how social life is structured around seeking both patronage and clientele. It results in a network where every man[98] has at least one person whose influence and resources he can count on as well as one or more individuals who are relying on his own generosity and capability in turn. Individuals also seek favours from their patrons exclusively to be able to provide favours for their own clients. New relations of patronage are actively sought after at the same time as already existing ones are more or less regularly cultivated. (ibid.). According to King, patron-client networks are an extension, and one of the major features, of Kurdish social life which she calls 'connecting'. In Kurdistan people 'connect', locally and globally, through for example patronage, kinship, gender and politics, and invest considerably in maintaining and building these social connections. (ibid. pp. 7–8).

The issue I have with King's characterisation is that, as I mentioned above, her undeniably impressive fieldwork experience spanning decades is drawn mostly from rural areas and small towns. Take patrilineal descent, for example: the educated city-dwellers I got to know in Slemani, and many of them had been in the 'cultural capital' for generations, were not particularly inclined to evoke a patrilineal ancestor eight generations away. While cultivating social relations was of extreme importance, they did not follow Ernest Gellner's "tribalist" notions such as 'segmentary alliances' (1989; 1990). Instead, people I was acquainted with generally had far more practical reasons for "connecting" outside their closest living kin. It is a point which can be derived from Bruinessen's analysis (2002) too, that affiliations in Kurdistan, while no doubt engendered by tribal or patrilineal relations far more often than in many other contexts[99], are in practice on many occasions based mostly on mutual social, economic or political interests than some kind of primordial descent. In order to appreciate the workings of power in Kurdistan Region, I would suggest that instead of flashy anthropological categories such as tribe or segment we are better off thinking in terms of influential families like the Kennedys or Bushes of the USA or old aristocrat and industrialist families in Finland[100]. As far as student life goes, if there is an aspect of descent

[98] For King the patron-client relationships are to a degree an extension of the patriliny. However, in my experience women are not ultimately exempt from *wasta* practices, even if they often become involved primarily through male relatives.

[99] The categorisations of "tribes" in Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, have been justifiably criticised in anthropology (among other disciplines) over the last few decades (e.g. Bruinessen 2002).

[100] It has to be stated here that Kurdistan Region is nonetheless a patrilineal society, tracing descent along the male lineage. For example, as a friend of mine was late for our meeting he apologised and said he was held up because his

which structures the social life of urban academia, it is one pertaining to family with its filial limits rather than the tribe as such.

Another point to consider in connection with *wasta* is raised by Caroline Humphrey in her analysis of favours in (mostly) Post-Soviet surroundings (2012). Her argument is that a favour is not a type of exchange, but works independently of the economy of markets. It includes a dimension of morality – an element of gratuitousness and the act of choosing a specific person to receive the favour. As it renders everyone involved significant, favour transforms both the person performing it and the person receiving it. While favours, much like *wasta* in Kurdistan Region, are carried out among family and friends, the act actually also transforms individuals into 'kin' and 'friends'. Favour becomes a source of self-worth. (ibid. pp. 22–23). I would argue, too, that patron-client relationships and networks of favours in Kurdistan are not about exchanges as such, though they often assume the task of structuring economic activities, but instead operate on a more profound level of the social fabric. During my stays in Slemani, every time I sat for tea or a meal, my hosts were adamant in their decision of paying the bill. Good manners and hospitality, perhaps, but more importantly it was a way to affirm and transform our relationship to one another.

It is true that corruption and nepotism are wide-spread in Kurdistan Region, and individuals also employ *wasta* for prospective economic gain. However, I am tempted to suggest that it is often the other way around – instead, in order to retain a face of benevolence, it is the cold economic calculation that is disguised as favours. Often my interlocutors would, despite deriding one particular form of "favouritism", readily engage in another. It was perfectly possible that a person would dismiss employment processes as corrupt, but shortly after note that if he had a problem with the authorities he would call one of his uncles to sort it out. *Wasta* is not only corruption and neither it is a survival strategy, even if it at times takes the form of one, but rather (I) a way to build and maintain social relations, and (II) a way to do things in a more convenient, personalised way. Many times *wasta* seems to be just a courtesy, a way of acknowledging the uniqueness of whoever one is interacting with, and sometimes it does moderate and smooth transactions. It is when it is crashing with the reality of the markets, the sprawling corporate political parties and the unequal North-South trade relations conditioning the socio-political spaces that it becomes the vehicle for nepotism and greed.

"sister's husband had just had a child". Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 4, there is an undeniable element of "tribalism" in the ways how elites and the processes of elite-formation function.

Opportunities

Not being able to navigate successfully in the patronage networks was far from being the only thing worrying students and fresh graduates. Another important matter was the disparities among different configurations of social and economic capital the students possessed. Or, as one of my friends, a university lecturer, simply put it: the inequality of opportunities. For reasons outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, both the history and the present stage of higher education is remarkably tumultuous. Personal, educational, and economic backgrounds play a considerable role in shaping the students' futures. Many primary and secondary schools did little to teach anything but the rudimentary skills, much to the students' disappointment. People with whom I brought this topic up, both students and members of academic staff alike, thought that there was a significant amount of catching up to do at the beginning of university studies[101]. Whether students' parents valued education, or could afford it, was important too.

Also, being accepted to university in the first place was a challenge to some. In principle the admissions are based on baccalaureate marks: the higher marks you receive at your final exams, the more choice you have in where to study. Based on these marks the government allocated applicants to different courses and universities and, thus, someone who had dreamed of studying fine arts at the University of Slemani might find him- or herself stuck with management and finance at a lower tier rural university. Or one might be sent off to Hewler for studies. I did also hear stories (which I had no time to corroborate) where the applicant's family's political background might be a factor in the admissions process, and prospective students with parents active in oppositional groups might be offered places in more remote institutions. The private universities offered more autonomy (and generally better studying resources) but charged tuition fees which, despite scholarship programs being offered, not everyone could afford[102]. Furthermore, the choice between public and private university affected student's career prospects: I was told many times that the public sector refused to hire private university graduates while the private sector recruited almost exclusively from the pool of private university graduates[103].

[101] For instance, a foreign lecturer at a private university said the students had in the beginning struggled with essay assignments, complaining that they did not know what was required of them, because they had been used to simple correct and wrong answers. Similarly, a school teacher, a relatively recent English graduate from a public university I met, cynically observed: "I can't speak English, and I'm supposed to teach them how to do it."

[102] Interestingly, at least in the case of American University of Iraq in Slemani (AUIS), the sum of tuition fees, too, depended on the applicant's baccalaureate scores.

[103] There are a number of reasons for this. For instance, many private university such as AUIS and KUST used English as the language of instruction and used the same software (in the case of finance, for instance) that would be used in the industry while most public universities, despite the fact that some campus areas were excellent, could generally only afford lecture notes and photo-copied articles. On the other hand, the public sector is also legally obliged to provide a certain amount of jobs specifically for its graduates.

An example to illustrate this friction: on my second trip in autumn, I met with a male student from a public university I had been acquainted with in spring. He had finished his degree in an economics subject with high marks, spoke good English and had work experience under his belt, but was now struggling to find employment. He had an on and off part-time job in a field which was completely outside of economics and finance, and which earned him less than a hundred US dollars per month. As we were on a *piazza* through the city's new centre he told me about his classmate, another student I had met in the spring. This man, now another public university top graduate, had managed to land a job in the oil sector – as a driver employed by one of the Western companies. A stark contrast to the situation of these two men was offered by a man I originally got to know when he studied in a business-related field at a private university. He had already garnered considerable work experience while studying and upon graduation he had got a job instantly in the oil industry. As we sat drinking five dollar coffees in a cafeteria popular among the private university students and urban middle class he mentioned he was pursuing a career switch to a post within a certain international NGO. He said he could afford the slight decrease in his salary, because the job was personally more meaningful.

5.2 Violence and uncertainty

> As we were nearing the airport we entered a buffer zone and continued on a road lined with blast walls. We would not be stopped for a while though ("at this point they only check cars which don't have Kurdistan license plates", my friend told me). After threading (what at least felt like) several kilometres among roadblocks made from concrete, passing by a number of Asayish [gendarmes] armed with assault rifles (some of them wearing balaclavas), we finally arrived at a checkpoint where passengers got out of the cars and continued on foot for a few metres while cars were checked with dogs for possible explosives. To get to where I am now [the gate from where the flight will leave] I went through security checks with metal detectors three times and had my passport inspected three times. I was photographed and fingerprinted, and my passport was carefully examined with UV light. I did not have to open my bags, which is probably because one could tell from a kilometre away that I was European.[104]

As I have argued, and hopefully proved already to some extent, life-worlds in Kurdistan Region are in many respects conditioned by violence. The students are not an exception to this. It is not violence of one single type or source, such as the Ba'athist Republican Guard or more recently ISIS,

[104] Personal field notes spring 2014.

but violence as an all-encompassing experience. It is violence internal and external to the society, and violence as sudden bursts as well as social structures. At the same time, it is violence of the past, and violence of the present. Violence, as I am studying it, consists also of both acts and results. And finally, violence also joins different locations and social realities together.

The first element of uncertainty connected with violence is obviously the impact of violence of the past, of the present, and of the future has on the social imaginary[105]. As Giorgio Agamben (1993, p. 96) has noted, the modern concept of time is rectilinear, homogenous, and abstracted from experience. In most cases, the same applies to the act of writing or recounting history, and my outline of the Kurdistan Region's past in previous chapters obviously, too, risks painting a picture of this kind of history. However, time and history are experienced (ibid. p. 91), and the experiences of violence, and the sense of uncertainty they engender, challenge this notion of rectilinearity.

It would seem like in the moments we come face to face with violence, or the potentiality of violence, time and history flow back and forth[106]. The rhetorical references to Anfal in the midst of economic pressure imposed by the Baghdad government (Chapter 3) are an expression of this on a larger societal level. The violence of the 1980s, the poverty, uncertainty, and polarising civil war of the 1990s as well as the war of the 2000s configure a present loaded with expectations of further conflict or unrest. Such conditions have been elaborated in Indian context by Veena Das, who notes how, in the aftermath of PM Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 bloody protests against Sikhs were further fuelled by wild rumours circulated among the Hindu population. The veracity of these rumours was validated by past experiences (such as the 1947 partition riots). (2007, pp. 108–133).

Henrik Vigh identifies in some ways similar processes as 'negative potentiality' (2011): that people anticipate violence to manifest in a present 'that is pregnant with negative processes, forces, and figures' (ibid. p. 94). My experience of the social imaginary of Kurdistan Region is in many cases similar to Vigh's experiences of Bissau and Belfast. The government's policies are known, and more importantly, *expected* to be corrupt. The public university system is similarly known, and often expected, to be rife with nepotism and arbitrariness. The Arab 'other' singularly, and Baghdad[107] collectively, are seen as potential oppressors. Vigh characterises this as 'hyper-vigilance', a state of being alert at all times and looking for signs of trouble. It is created by constantly reconfigured and

[105] By 'social imaginary', I refer to what Henrik Vigh (2006, p. 483) has defined as 'the way in which we comprehend the unfolding of our social terrain and our position and possibilities of movement in it.' Social imaginary 'designates our understanding of our society's movement through space and time and our formation as social categories created and defined within this perceived spatio-temporal development.' (ibid.)

[106] See also Eric J. Haanstad's (2009) discussion of violence and temporality.

[107] To a degree also the Kurdish ministers, and especially MPs, seem to share this perception of Baghdad's negative potentiality.

disrupted political processes and short lived power formations and it persists even during a period of peace with seemingly established parties, institutions and allegiances. Hyper-vigilance leads to the world becoming 'hyper-signified'. (Vigh 2011, p. 98). A closely parallel state can, I would argue, be observed especially among many of the public university students of Slemani. It is a contradictory state of disbelief bordering nihilism accompanied by a passion for social protest in equal measures, of being always on the lookout for signs of further unrest or political failure.

The second element of uncertainty engendered by violence is constituted by the various forms of violence to be experienced. It is related to the concept of negative potentiality to a degree, but at the same time it extends the social imaginary to actual structures, policies, and global concerns. I will seek to address this phenomenon here by looking at Phillippe Bourgois' (2009, p. 19) 'Pandora's Box of Invisible Violence': (I) structural violence, including the political and economic forces, the international terms of trade, and unequal access to resources, services, rights, and security, (II) symbolic violence, which is domination, hierarchies, and internalised insults that are legitimised as natural and deserved, and (III) normalised violence, which includes institutional practices, discourses, cultural values, ideologies, everyday interactions, and routinised bureaucracies that render violence invisible and produce social indifference.

For Farmer (2004; 2009) structural violence[108] is historically rooted global inequality which renders some people or populations into more a vulnerable position than others, and I largely subscribe to this view. However, structural violence is also local, and the sites where it manifests in certainly are so. Bourgois notes (2009, p. 19) that structural violence, despite its invisibility, is shaped by visible institutions, relations and ideologies such as international trade terms based on unequal markets, legal and carceral systems, and inequity among genders and other social positions people assume are cast into. The concept aims at addressing an institutional arrangement which results in physical or psychological harm to a portion of population, or which limits their freedom (Graeber 2012, 112).

David Graeber (ibid.), however, puts forward another reading of the same term. What generally is referred to as 'structural violence' are situations and structures which have violent outcomes, but instead, they should be seen as 'structures of violence' because 'it is only the constant fear of physical violence that makes them possible, and allows them to have violent effects'. To him for example racism, sexism or poverty could not exist except in an environment defined by the threat of physical force. (ibid. pp. 112–113). This leads him to conclude that structural violence is structures

[108] As referred to by Graeber (2012) the term 'structural violence' was originally coined by Johan Galtung (1969).

backed up by the threat of force and coercion, rather than simply structures which produce harmful or violent outcomes. (ibid.)

The concept of symbolic violence, the second type of invisible violence in Bourgois' analysis, was originally developed by Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 2001). It is essentially a mechanism by which the dominated or marginalised naturalise the status quo and blame themselves for their domination. According to Bourgois, symbolic violence occurs through a process of misrecognition, as the socially dominated come to believe that hierarchies which limit their possibilities are 'accurate representations of who they are, what they deserve, and how the world has to be' (Bourgois 2009, p. 19). Normalised violence, institutional practices, beliefs, norms, and everyday interactions, are observable for example in institutional tolerance towards violence against women or poor healthcare. It is the social production of indifference towards brutality and inequality (ibid. p. 20).

Violence in practice

How do these aspects and forms of violence that engender uncertainty appear in contemporary Kurdistan Region? First, I will address symbolic and normalised violence which will, however, be analysed in more detail below when discussing uncertainty in relation to social status. I was surprised during my fieldwork how some (not all of them, by any means) of my interlocutors would speak of Kurdish culture as backward and introverted. This was especially the case in group interviews, when some of those of more secular outlook elaborated on the effects of globalisation and new technologies positively as something which would force Kurdish culture to change. Having said that, statements which followed similar logic, even if they were quite the opposite in substance, would be made by some of the most religiously devout students. In my experience, while the more religious held that popular culture with music videos was destructive to moral tradition, they also found pristine Islam through religious websites (“it simply depends on how you use the internet” as one my interlocutors said), a conviction they felt the Kurdish society had lost but with which they themselves were now being reconnected.

Both discourses outlined above, which seem to be in conflict with the high level of nationalist sentiment found around the region, reveal an underlying effect of symbolic violence. For long the Kurds as an ethno-linguistically distinct group have been subordinated, dominated first by two great empires and then by increasingly centralist authoritarian states where they have been a marginalised minority (e.g. McDowall 2004; Nezan 1996). In the same way, they have been both subjugated by

major colonial forces such as the British Empire and caught in the midst of the Cold War and post-Cold War global power games. In spite of the fact that present-day Kurdistan Region in Iraq is perhaps the only Kurdish-majority region where Kurdishness is not actively marginalised, a form of symbolic violence persists: the idea of Kurds as uncivilised people, incompatible with modernity without external support, or alternatively as lowly unbelievers of some kind. In short, the very portrait painted by dominant Arab, Persian and Turkish administrations. One of the most common opinions among my acquaintances was that improved access to media and literature in general was a good thing for any society, not just the Kurds, and it was precisely this access that globalisation and economic change had granted, and which the previous conditions had not allowed. Still, there were undeniably also sentiments in which symbolic violence was embedded. When this pervasive feeling of inadequacy occurred, which was by no means all the time, I would argue it was created in many ways by the misrecognition of both the historical reality as well as the peripheral experience of invisibility, where the former justified the latter[109].

There are two more apt, and relatively common, discourses marked by symbolic violence. First of all, during the flights between Finland and Kurdistan Region, when I would talk about my trip with Kurds permanently residing in Europe, to my surprise people would tell me to be on guard at all times, because their fellow Kurds would try to cheat me anyway. Notwithstanding my inability to bargain properly, in reality there were no situations in which I would have been taken for a ride, yet supposedly “Kurds can't be trusted”, as one gentleman at one of the airports noted. Second of all, and this is a topic which I am trying to analyse with as much care as possible, another common form of symbolic violence concerns violence against women. I will discuss intimate partner violence later in connection with both naturalised violence and uncertainty caused by social status. Here I would like to only point out that the same kind of logic that designates Kurdish traditions (or rather, a reified version of various strands of tradition) as the remnants of an uncivilised past is likewise found in ways how political actors and social activists, as well as some of my interlocutors, refer to violence against women taking place because of the society's Kurdishness[110].

The case of normalised violence is even more complicated. In more than one way it is related to the question of status I am about to elaborate on below, but a short discussion about the subject is in order here. This type of violence is exemplified by the proliferation of different (and often heavy handed) security organisations as well as the partly shadowy carceral system of the region. Another

[109] Often I would also encounter situations where this form of symbolic violence, as well as the relative marginalisation of Kurds, was challenged and turned on its head. It was in bars or other informal surroundings where men would on many occasions proudly tell me things like “you see we're not Iraqis, we're not killers like the Arabs”.

[110] See Abu-Lughod’s (2011, p. 35) discussion of this phenomena in connection to writers, intellectuals, and activists of “the East” asserting their progressiveness.

aspect relates to values and social norms. Judging by what I have observed, Kurdish culture, in cities, and even more so in “the villages”, emphasises three things: family (including extended family), honour, and loyalty.

This results in a number of positive, supportive social phenomena. For instance, in the airplane, in Slemani's parks or streets or virtually anywhere in the public space people look after children whether they were their own or not. One example of this is how at the airport security control it was not uncommon to see the guards letting pregnant women or women with small children to skip the queueing and move past the line. In spite of the sentiment that underlines the rampant corruption of the region and, as I discussed above, the vigilance towards the negative potentiality of 'others', there was very little, if any, street violence or theft. Street vendors, even those selling mobile phones or luxury items, would display their merchandise out in the open without the fear of somebody in the crowd stealing anything. The same goes for the old men who exchanged money: they would sit by the street with huge stacks of cash being piled up on top of small drawers or chests. Shopkeepers could go somewhere during midday and simply leave boxes of beverages or snacks unlocked and on the pavement. Family ties were cultivated, in some cases the fact that someone had not seen his mother for about three weeks was a social distance bordering alienation. My fieldwork was made considerably easier (practically possible in the first place) because of connections my friends would have, as someone always had a sister's husband, nephew, brother, spouse, or any other relative in possession of something I needed, or this relative happened to work or study in this or that institution.

Yet, these values, family, honour, and loyalty, manifest also as instruments of oppression or social pressure. As Kurdistan Region's recent past shows us, a breach of trust may result in retaliation, and loyalty may engender violence. As will be analysed below, social life in Slemani is constructed around various norms and expectations of proper, honourable conduct, as well as obligations towards one's kin and close ones. This results in configurations of inclusion and exclusion, ways to penalise improper behaviour, and enforce correct and modest conduct. Values and norms relating to religion could also cause conflicts. For example, Muslims, which majority of Kurds are in one way or another, were not (in theory, as I will discuss later) permitted to consume or trade alcohol. Shops selling alcohol are essentially ran buy either Christians or Yazidis, which creates a kind of “double-othering” on the whole issue around alcohol. In 2011, following a Friday sermon, riots erupted in Zakho, Duhok governorate. Liquor stores, massage parlours and a tourist accommodation were torched. The unrest reached Slemani as well, where a massage parlour was also set on fire. Whether it was simply religiously motivated, or an extension of a deeper political friction between KDP and

KIU (Kurdistan Islamic Union) supporters (because, in retaliation, KIU premises were similarly attacked) remains unclear. (Karim & Saifaddin, December 5, 2011; Asaad December 15, 2011).

Public spaces are often strongly gendered: women are not expected to just walk around on their own or sit at teashops. Instead their past-time is first and foremost circumscribed to restaurants, shopping centres, parks (provided they are accompanied by other people, such as friends or family), and in the most extreme cases to home. Most of the time only married couples are seen to hold hands in public. I will later offer some examples of both inherent ambiguities and counter-discourses to this picture of Kurdish social norms, but for now it is sufficient to acknowledge that at times these norms are violently enforced. Occasions of violence and murder, especially against women, which are in some weird way facilitated by the present institutional and social conditions are far from being unknown to Kurdistan Region.

The length at which I have addressed structural violence should not divert our attention away from the fact that violence is not obviously simply structural or 'invisible'. Instead, it is very much also physical and concrete, sometimes predictable and other times abrupt. ISIS, or *Daesh*, is a real threat to many Kurds. Likewise, the authorities' violent suppression of 2011 demonstrations against KRG in Slemani governorate, which left ten people dead and hundreds wounded, escaped nobody's attention[111]. Similarly, while some experience police brutality, others join the ranks of the security apparatus. Violence and conflict also breed further violence, often of a different shape and form.

I would like to propose that to make sense of both direct and structural violence[112], and the uncertainty they engender, we also have to, again, look back in time. In Kurdistan Region, not only the hundreds of thousands of casualties and an even greater number of displaced mounted over the decades, but also the landscape and the social surroundings constantly remind people of war and terror. Just to give one example which applies widely to many parts of Kurdistan Region: according to Almas Heshmati and Nabaz T. Khayyat, only one sixth of the mines laid have been cleared and between 1991 and 2007 landmines and explosive remnants of war, none of them manufactured in Kurdistan, have claimed 8 174 victims (including both casualties and those injured) (2013, p. 27). The anti-mine NGO coalition ICBL's report, in turn, shows that in 2013 NGO IKMAA (Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency) destroyed 8 108 anti-personnel mines and 323 anti-vehicle mines, as well as 6 309 items of unexploded ordnance (UXO) from an area of just 4.32 km² (ICBL October 29, 2014). As David Henig (2002) notes, mines, shrapnel and other types of military waste not only

[111] See for example Kurd Net (February 17, 2014).
[112] I am referring to structural violence here in its both understandings, as discussed by Farmer and Graeber above.

pose a threat to health in the areas afflicted, but also construct a very particular configuration of memory and spatial orientation. Shrapnel and mines 'belong to no-one, and yet to everyone' (ibid. p. 23). Obviously, majority of my acquaintances were from the city area, and thus lived free of minefields (which naturally resided in the border areas of the governorate), but another active reminder of past and present violence pervaded Slemani thoroughly: the security apparatus.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, historically Kurdistan has consisted of several fiefdoms or principalities/emirates where notables and leaders obviously had their own troops. During the course of the 20th century, the struggle against the authoritarian and centralist state apparatus lead to the creation of the peshmergas, an irregular guerilla force, who carried on fighting the Ba'athist regime until the latter's disposal in 2003. As I have also noted in Chapter 3, the Kurdistan Front's peshmergas were both supported, and at times opposed, by tribal and village militias or armed troops led by other charismatic leaders such as Sufi sheikhs. I believe it is justifiable to argue that this tradition of armed struggle and threat of lethal force met in 2003 a new social and political reality when the Kurdish troops had an internationally recognised entity to protect (the southern border KRG shares with the rest of Iraq, however, was and remains disputed).

Quite understandably, considering that Kurdistan Region's autonomy was not perceived positively around the region and the civil war raging elsewhere in Iraq[113], over the course of the last ten years or so the size and the pervasive nature of the security apparatus has grown. In addition to police, Asayish, and peshmerga, several other intelligence and counter-terrorism agencies are also operating within the region. King has observed how the amount of firearms seen on the streets has decreased over the last few years[114], indicating the growth of the modern state's power (2014, p. 219). The modern state has, at least ideally, a 'lock on legitimate use of violence' which renders non-state violence illegal. She also notes that the KRG has assumed a considerably larger role in security than either it or the Iraqi government did earlier. (ibid. p. 220). I was once going to one of Slemani's public parks with a friend of mine, a student at the University of Slemani, as we walked past a group of five policemen. My friend's notion was telling: "Before there was agriculture, but now there's just the police! Everyone here is police, peshmerga, Asayish[115]... You know, there's like ten different names for the security forces. And in the occasion that people don't work in the security, they're government officials."

[113] Indeed, while such incidents were practically unheard of for years until late 2013, bombings did occur previously within Kurdistan's borders too.

[114] This is easy to believe. I personally saw only twice any armed guards without uniform of some sort (basically police or Asayish).

[115] The Asayish are the gendarmerie and security services responsible for internal security.

The nature of this security apparatus is ambiguous, not least because there are still actually two separate apparatuses functioning in the region. The internal political division which erupted into a civil war in 1994 also separated the administrative sphere of KRG into two different parallel governments. This is reflected in the contemporary arrangement where the governorates of Duhok and Hewler are for a large part under KDP's control and the Slemani governorate is controlled by PUK. While the formal political representation today is a lot more colourful, especially with Gorran now drawing a lot of PUK votes and pushing the latter to opposition, on the ground level a lot of the administration, including the security forces, is centred on the two traditional parties[116]. While nominally upholding order and protecting the Kurdish society against the threats of terrorism (both home-brewed and external), like in the 1990s they do at times act as an extension of both party political interests and patron-client loyalties. While King's notion about the state power is certainly true, I would suggest there is another point which should be considered – that the state, when trying to accommodate to its separate position in the global world-economy, has actually incorporated a lot of "non-state" roles and practices, such as *wasta* networks and local strongmen, within its repertoire. In other words, where ordinary men used to be carrying guns for protection now these guns are accompanied by an officially sanctioned uniform. An outgrowth of this is that security forces do occasionally for example also "police" free speech and political dissent, as police and counter-terrorism agents are known to harass or attack journalists[117] critical of the KRG.

One of my non-Kurdish acquaintances noted to me that "people here give up some of their freedom in exchange for safety". Later in the evening I began to think that the remark actually carried far more depth than I had initially thought. The historical trajectories, successive decades of violence and the threat of even more violence, have resulted in a social imaginary revolving around security and continuous emergency, which is fed by the immanence of terror and brutality that has engulfed the rest of Iraq. It manifests in cold-blooded policing of Kurdistan Region's borders, violent personal or factional rivalry, and crackdowns of independent media and other forms of voiced dissidence, acts which are carried out with the same ease as one buys a pack of roasted sunflower seeds from a street vendor.

[116] An example to illustrate this in practice: as ISIS began its bloodiest assault in Iraq during the summer of 2014, it was the peshmergas of PUK that moved in to take the hold of Kirkuk. The Shingal tragedy that made headlines across the Global North too, when initially tens of thousands of Yazidis were besieged by ISIS on Mount Shingal without food or water, was in turn a major blow for the KDP who was responsible for the peshmergas who had left their post in the city of Shingal.

[117] Abuse, even murders, of journalists have taken place in suspicious circumstances, and often with impunity (e.g. Namo Abdulla April 22, 2014; Human Rights Watch February 10, 2013). A famous case is that of Sardasht Osman, an independent Hewler journalist who had criticised nepotism and corruption within the government several times. After he had published a satirical poem about changing his life by marrying President Barzani's daughter, Osman disappeared from Hewler only to be found shot in Mosul a day later, outside formal KRG borders. To everyone's surprise, official government investigation concluded that Osman was in fact in contact with Ansar al-Islam who had killed him. (E.g. Reporters Without Borders May 4, 2012; Committee to Protect Journalists May 5, 2010).

It is a social reality rife with Vigh's negative potentiality – the same kind of vigilance which makes students mistrust the political process or the administration of higher education that consumes members of the political bureaus who fought for years to get to where they are now. Similarly, men and women who joined the police or the Asayish, perhaps because of willingness to serve their society, due to loyalty, or simply to find any kind of employment, did not do so to be able to legitimately crack down political opposition, but rather end up acting on this hypersensitive form of vigilance. It is a very particular social reality of a society regenerating its wounds, resulting from impunity, terror, and inequality, both locally and globally. In some respects, it is a situation unsettlingly similar to Michael Taussig's 'spaces of death' which 'blend into a common pool of key signifiers binding the transforming culture of the conquerer with that of the conquered' (Taussig 1991, p. 5).

5.3 Uncertainty of status

"It's not in the city. That's why they still behave like villagers."

A public university graduate commenting on a rural university

One of the most personal, and contradictory, aspect of uncertainty in the student's lives was created by concerns about one's social status. This is obviously connected to both economy and violence, but in certain respects also goes further. A person's, in this case a student's, status is engendered through various practices and expectations connected with socio-economic auspiciousness, the successful observance of social obligations, and honourable conduct. Status in Slemani is constructed and maintained in the eyes of different social groupings such as peers, family, and the society, which may often have mutually incompatible expectations.

Work

One telling example concerns the display of wealth analysed below in Chapter 6, which seems to me to be directly connected with a person's perception of status ("I have done this well in life"). Many of the even slightly older people (30 years and above) criticised the urban youth of being obsessed about prestige, which was indicated by flashy consumer goods and "international" style. I was also told that the youth were picky about what jobs were good enough for them, and that work such as waste management was below their self-proclaimed standards. As will be elaborated in the next chapter, the students themselves would voice similar kinds of criticisms towards what they

perceived as an overtly materialistic way of life. A friend of mine noted, with a hint of irony (and intended or not, accompanied by a nod towards the economic relations between North and South as much as at the inversion of symbolic violence in Kurdish-Arab relations), that "when we Kurds travel to Europe we do whatever work we can find, cleaning, services and so on. But at home we refuse to do those. It's the Arabs and others who have to do it."[118]

However, some of my acquaintances would protest that their families and their social surroundings did not for example consider service work to be "real work" either[119]. It was as if one could not earn a proper living, or support oneself or one's family honourably by collecting rubbish or bowing to anyone. As unemployment among fresh graduates was currently a major issue in Kurdistan Region, status related to work, and for men also related to the capability to support oneself or a family financially, became a highly pressing and ambiguous matter in many of the conversations I would have with students and recent graduates in Slemani. On the one hand, my acquaintances were largely from lower and upper middle class backgrounds, and sought to assert this position in contrast to the Kurdish society of the past decades, or they felt angry that they could not achieve what their class position and education should entitle them to. On the other hand, I would argue that refusing one type of work was also about resistance, dignity, and sovereignty. That Kurds collectively would refuse work such as rubbish collecting specifically in Kurdistan Region, but not in other locations, was also about national sovereignty: "this is *our* land".

Talking about others

The proper, honourable conduct, as discussed above in relation to normalised violence, is also central to the production of status. Through behaviour and signifiers such as clothing in public spaces, this honourable conduct is connected to the visible display and embodiment of status. On the other hand, status is produced and altered through the invisible, by laws requiring men to be present for example when a woman gets her passport (King 2014, p. 109), but also by rumours, gossip, and reputation. These dimensions of status are the most important in relation to gender and

[118] Two important things can be discerned from this statement. First of all, service work, even if poorly paid by European standards, is a much better source of income than similar jobs in Kurdistan Region. Second of all, to my understanding Kurds in Europe, while identifying with the city or neighbourhood they live in (such as "Londoners" or "Tampere-born"), define themselves often as Kurds and not Finns or British in terms of national identity. This relates also to the complex configurations of ethnicity, social capital, otherness, and marginalisation. I cannot go into the dynamics of class and ethnicity here, but will note that in Kurdistan Region the Kurds occupy an entirely different social position, that of a majority.

[119] Indeed, the number of ethnic Kurds working in the services industry around the city centre was proportionally low. When they did, it was often jobs where a level of prestige was involved, such as security, or better hotels, shopping centres and fashion boutiques catering to the middle and upper middle classes, as well as the numerous foreigners in the region.

the concepts of modesty and sexual honour by which it is constructed. A female acquaintance of mine had studied at the University of Slemani, but at another campus which was located outside of the city in a smaller more rural town. She explained questions about modesty and honour in practice to me in the following way:

> "Most of them [inhabitants of the more rural town], they are close-minded. They don't accept those students who come from the outside. They couldn't understand what kind of parents would let their daughter go to another town for studying, and doubted if I am a good, modest person. Very few of their own children studied in Slemani, because most of them wouldn't allow their girls to go away on their own. And this applies especially to the girls. While the boys are free to go wherever they want, the girls are not. They were not allowed to hang in the town, they just came to the college and went straight back home after the lectures. No parks or cafes, just to college and back, and that's all. It's quite different here. As I told you I covered [wore a headscarf] during my time there. And if I go there now, I will cover again, because they met me like that in the first place. If they meet me like this, they'll be surprised and they go like "why isn't she covered, why?""

Honour seems to me to be the amalgamation of modesty, decency and trustworthiness. Honour is also connected to family: on the one hand a person is not supposed to bring his or her family to shame and on the other hand, family is supposed to look after their children and kin. As my acquaintance shows above, what honour exactly entails varies from community to community and family to family ("if I go there now, I will cover again"). The fundamental sentiment that is described in the example above is that women especially were expected to be modest and well-behaved. Even if many of my interlocutors would not see the headscarf as any indication of honour, good manners, or religiosity, they certainly perceived the surrounding society often to be doing so (actually, one female student felt obliged to explain to me "I don't wear hijab, but *I do* love God and pray regularly"). What is apparent in the quote below, however, is that honourable conduct was also expected of men. Status, whether in regard to honourable behaviour or for example wealth, also had to be safeguarded. This was one of the motivators for "proper" conduct. A friend of mine told me once, anxiously, that "rumours are absolutely the worst thing about our society". The same woman quoted at length above explained rumours on campus like this:

> "Yeah, there's rumours everywhere. We don't talk about ourselves, as a society, we talk about each other. "Why is she sitting like that? She should sit like this" "He drinks a lot, he shouldn't drink like that." "Oh that girl's sitting here." We talk about others, not about

ourselves. We talk about the non-important things. And at the university, I'm talking about my university obviously, and I hate it because of this... [Laughs] I mean I have many friends there who are open-minded, but many other people are just gossiping. But in Slemani it's somehow a lot freer than where I studied. People can kind of sit and eat wherever they like, even at lectures."[120]

In my experience looking at and talking about others has a two dimensions. On the one hand, as my interlocutor above stated, people were gossiping and talking about others while, in theory, it was most likely none of their business, but on the other hand, my acquaintances were often also telling me about events through other people. Very rarely would anyone tell me for example how they had found their wives or husbands, but would be happy to enlighten me about how other people had done it. Expressions like "well, some people are..." or "people always..." were far more common when we were talking about themes relating to status. It was another strategy to direct attention away from oneself. And I would not press my interlocutors to do it in any other way.

Defending honour

I often went to this one bar to go through day's field notes and observe the "different" kind of Slemani: one with Western music videos, loud hip hop, open consumption of alcohol, and guest workers. Tonight something exceptional happened. A couple, a man and a woman in their early twenties, came in. It was the first time I had ever seen a Kurdish woman in a bar. Even more exceptional was that they were not married, the man introduced the woman to me as his girlfriend (a word rarely used in Kurdistan Region, where romantic involvement was usually confined to formalised relations such as 'husband', 'wife' and 'fiancé' or 'fiancée'). It turned out they lived in Europe. Men in the bar were staring at the couple, especially at the woman. All of a sudden the man noticed that someone took a photograph of his girlfriend. After a short shouting match the situation was about to escalate to a brawl, and the bouncer of the bar had to intervene. The man who had taken the photograph was escorted out together with his friends, still shouting.[121]

I have argued above that spatial mobility ("who can go where") and proper, honourable conduct ("who can do what") were, together with success in studies and employment, the major sources of status for the students (and to a degree for all social groupings in Slemani). Contradictory to some previous scholarly work on the subject (e.g. King 2008, 2014) and a lot of popular culture myths, to

[120] In fact, in my experience students at the public universities in Slemani did not sit at lectures any more freely than in university campuses outside the city. It might also be that the students I was in lecture halls with were more conservative than some of my other interlocutors.

[121] Personal field notes, spring 2014.

me it looked like the boundaries of honourable behaviour were not most of the time curtailed or enforced by force as such but by nuanced, invisible social practices which rendered men and women who breached those limits as suspicious, unwanted, and dirty – not proper men and women. One primary concern was over sexual purity. Like in many other regions and societies, in Kurdistan Region sexual affairs outside marriage are often strictly prohibited. Pre- or extra-marital affairs, even suspicions of such incidents, can result in serious damage to one's status and even in violent retribution, on rare occasions of the most extreme kind. This was especially the case for women, but formally to men as well despite the considerable leeway they usually enjoyed compared with women in terms of modesty.

While men could also be victims of actual violence relating to transgressions on honour, I was usually told it would be the women who bore the brunt of this kind of violence. It is often conceptualised in contemporary discourses as honour-based violence, its most extreme form being what is referred to as "honour killings", where the honour of a family or lineage is restored by murdering the woman who caused the loss of honour with her conduct, often by engaging in an illicit sexual affair. This act of homicide is carried out usually by the woman's father or brothers. In her survey of "honour killings" King (2008; 2014, pp. 131–137) has come to the conclusion that the phenomenon is observable in societies and cultural communities stretching from circum-Mediterranean to Middle East and South Asia. The key feature for all of these societies is, for her, patrilineal kinship reckoning[122] (2008, pp. 318–319).

Following Lila Abu-Lughod (2011), however, I propose another kind of take on violence conceptualised as honour-related, and domestic violence in general. King is probably right to assert (2008; 2014, pp. 131–137) the relevance of agnatic descent[123] in the ways how honour is constructed. Nonetheless, her tendency to downplay the possible influence of socio-historical factors and relations of power, and the limits of her own ethnographic account[124] come close to creating a kind of reified version of Kurdish culture, one which is reproduced in its pristine and primordial form. She offers an interesting description how the purity of women, i.e. the future of a lineage (men have to be sure that the child is really theirs), became equated with the future of a nation after the events of 1991. Having said that, what King's analysis seems to stop at is the recognition of the patriliny. The possibility of violence and terror creating a 'culture of terror'

[122] See also Delaney (1991) to which King makes number of references in relation to honour's connection to patrilineal descent.

[123] On the other hand, the same could be said of the effect of any kind of descent in any kind of social contexts, at any given time, on any kind of concept of honour. Nonetheless, it is useful to keep in mind that these interrelations do exist.

[124] For instance, a good part of her material she is referring to is collected during or right after the civil war, another high point of 'negative potentiality' in Vigh's terms.

(Taussig 1991, pp. 3–36), and that violence against women, too, is contingent on both the socio-historical context and the present institutional, legal, local, and global social configurations (Abu-Lughod 2011) are not seriously considered. Neither is the fact that subordination of women does not seem to be confined to any specific cultural community, but is global instead. It is ironic that, when King (2008, p. 318) argues that the 'hymen is both a symbolic and real border to membership in the group' (i.e. the Kurdish nation), Abu-Lughod states, and in no relation to King's thesis, that 'it is a leap to go from the importance of sexual propriety to the conclusion that women are reduced to their hymens' (2011, p. 22).

There are also ethnographic reasons why King's analysis seems to me as insufficient. While King describes that most of her 'female interlocutors who were of childbearing age (but not those younger or older) seemed to live in constant fear' (King 2008, p. 322) of honour killings, my experiences among the students were very different[125]. Some of my interlocutors did lament the gender inequality present in the region, and others were afraid of more lax morals. Likewise, many were proud of the changes that the gender system in Slemani had gone through over the course of last 5–10 years, while others considered Kurdish culture to be backward in this regard. Gender, sexuality, and honour were very much present in both private chats and group interviews, but their meanings were debated and contested, not taken for granted. The excerpt from my field notes quoted at the beginning of this section illustrates this dynamic character of honour. The man did not think there was anything transgressive about them being not married or anything exceptional that his girlfriend was at the bar. Nevertheless, what he objected to was the fact that others were taking photographs of his girlfriend, and took it to himself to defend her, and his, honour.

In many ways the gender system in Kurdistan Region has somewhat loosened over the last few years, or at least transformed. There are, however, clearly masculine and feminine roles. One visible role structure is related to work life. Women, who generally are assumed to take care of the household and cook at home were almost never, according to my observations, working in restaurants or cafes where the staff consisted exclusively of men. The same applied to other low skilled labour and work where one might get one's hands dirty, such as street vendors, bakers, shopkeepers, mechanics, taxi drivers and so forth. Otherwise, on the surface, women could be working in white-collar jobs and participate in politics. Though heads of departments were mostly men, women worked at universities as well, and to my knowledge, generally made up the higher proportion of the student body too. There are women (albeit in smaller numbers) serving in police,

[125] King is hardly oblivious to the fact that material she collected on the field may have limits in terms of representativeness. She does mention in passing that she 'did get a sense from several women who had previously lived in the large city of Mosul that they had experienced less fear there than in the towns' (2008, p. 322).

Asayish and peshmerga forces, a detail which the media in the Global North seems to valorise and mystify in almost Orientalist fashion, to quote Edward W. Said (2003).

We achieve equally little if we either downplay or over exaggerate the role of the concept of honour in violence and, while we recognise that domestic violence is a real issue, a more nuanced approach is possible. Equally so in Kurdistan Region. Even more importantly, and this is also an anthropological concern, when concepts such as gender norms are discussed, there is always a risk of making the mistake of reifying culture. To quote Abu-Lughod (2011, p. 51): '[T]he specifics are important, and as an anthropologist I must insist that we must go deeply into different systems of gender, power, and morality if we want to understand interpersonal violence: how it is provoked, understood, experienced, and regulated'. In reality there is no singular, monolithic "culture" which all people in a given group would experience, recognise or follow in the same way[126]. Religious and cultural practices or moral norms are never perfectly reproduced or adhered to (e.g. Schielke 2009; Dahlgren & Schielke 2013). The same is true about the students I worked with. It was perfectly possible to me to sit in a cafe with a female student or a recent graduate without anybody taking offense (and I was told that they did so with their Kurdish male friends too), but it was equally possible that a female student would tell me this:

> "I like popular culture to be restricted. Globalisation shouldn't mean that there are no [moral] boundaries. I don't like to see two actors in the drama kissing each other. But I can live with that, I wouldn't be killing them just for that."

"Just for that" can be a joke. At the same time it can imply that there are other transgressions of moral boundaries where killing one or both of the individuals involved would be understandable. Or that somebody else would resort to violence for such an offence. Yet, even those who were concerned with status, or observing traditional or Islamic doctrines[127] as they were generally understood in Kurdistan Region, would often circumvent some of the implicit or explicit rules that came with their personal disposition. For instance, an interlocutor, a man in his late twenties, would be indulging himself some vodka and nod to me "I'm a Muslim, you know, but in this regard I'm a Christian". Another man told me, with a mixture of irony and apology, and after professing his religiosity, that "well, I actually only follow sermons on Fridays". Dating and sex do also occur, even if it was elaborated on only with hushed voices. Some of the men I was acquainted with did

[126] There are also other reasons for violence against women that do not relate to honour, such as social marginalisation in general, or acts pertaining to jealousy, heartache, or mental disorders.

[127] It is important to note, as Abu-Lughod (2011, e.g. p. 48) too suggests, that neither tradition and religious piety nor honour and sin are interchangeable.

openly look at women they found attractive when walking around the city. Romantic involvement, dating, sexual relations, or looking for a suitable partner for marriage often seemed to involve a lot of secrecy and bending of social conventions. In arranging meetings with one another, young men and women would enlist the help of their siblings who might know the person they were interested in. Mobile phones made relationships and courting easier[128]. I was also told about the strategy of setting up numerous Facebook accounts to cover one's tracks: first would be the account the person's parents saw and the rest were used to whatever the person did not want their families to know about. “Obviously, we like the girls so we have to find a way”, said a friend of mine about discreetly “checking” women.

Some of the major changes that have taken place over the course of last 5–10 years in gender structures are also related to women's mobility. While I rarely saw women driving cars, I was told this did happen nowadays[129] (King 2014, pp. 103–108 notes the same thing). A female NGO worker told me of a particularly busy day she had had earlier in 2014. She was organising matters at different refugee camps and therefore had to take a taxi on her own several times. She remarked that she was really surprised that not a single taxi would refuse to take her, which would not necessarily have been the case a few years ago. Public spaces have changed too. Nowadays, in addition to picnics, shopping centres, cafes and restaurants were places where women could hang out and meet with their friends. This was something that even Slemani, known in Kurdistan Region for its open-mindedness, did not use to have to this extent. Some of the students and friends with whom I discussed this topic said it was due to globalisation. This is certainly true, but what aspect of what we know as globalisation is it that we are talking about? It might be due to the availability of various forms of media from around the world, or it could be the effect of foreign NGOs or investments. A more plausible, and empirically founded, explanation might be hinted at by King (2014, p. 112) when she notes that according to her observations a lot of North American popular culture such as rap music came to Kurdistan the with Kurdish people who came back the US and Europe.

After the end of Saddam Hussein's brutal reign more and more Kurds have returned to Kurdistan Region from Europe and the US. It is not completely unheard of that Kurds who had either lived extensively or even born in Europe would, upon their return, build spa hotels, cafes serving burgers,

[128] Generally, though, marriage required the approval of the spouses' parents.

[129] It is important to note that driving was not a punishable act for women, and it had not been so even before. It was more like one of those things that just did not happen, because it might raise suspicions of one kind or the other. Teashops, which were exclusively men's area, were a similar case. If a woman went to a teashop, she would cause confusion, perhaps anger, and probably incite a few laughs or start some rumours, but it was not necessarily a grave insult as such.

and shopping centres offering Italian fashion. Ultimately, the thing with cafes, for example, is that there simply were not that many of them ten years ago, and yet there definitely is a demand for such enterprises now. Likewise, one final thing to consider in relation to gender roles, domestic violence, and women's autonomy is that local activists, politicians, Kurdish NGOs, and women's rights groups have independently struggled for gender equality for decades. While international support has certainly helped, it is not international NGOs or global pressue which originally started the movements working towards gender equality. Most importantly, I would argue, it is the disappearance of the double-sanctions and the (even partial) international recognition of the region which have helped in improving the possibilities of "indigenous" Kurdish activism.

Picture 6: Mobile phones and tablets for sale.

(Photograph by Ville Laakkonen)

6. Transforming subjectivities, altering faith

"The whole world must know that we are fighting against a corrupt government."

A private university student.

How do students react to uncertainty? To answer this I will first address the general ambiguity of studying and living in Slemani as it is experienced by the students themselves. Later on I will be looking at how students reflect on these contradictory realities from a religious point of view. While my focus here is on the ethnographic reality of Slemani, at times larger developments in the whole world and the Middle East have to be brought to the fore to appreciate their role in Kurdistan Region.

At the end of a group interview session at one of the city's public universities a female student raised her hand and, after warmly welcoming me to Kurdistan, asked what did I think about the students, their ideas and their level of knowledge. Did I consider them to be poor and underdeveloped? I replied that quite to the contrary, as based on my experiences I perceived the students to be extremely up to date, observant and critically analytical in the socio-economic and political matters we had been talking about. The question, however, continued to haunt me for the rest of the day. It was a fairly straightforward and simple question but, like the best straightforward and simple questions usually do, offered a possibility of catching the sight of a whole array of questions present in the students' everyday life that were far more complex than they would seem to an outsider.

The rapid economic transformation after the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime and especially during the last 5 – 10 years has altered the social structures and surroundings of the students' lives. As already stated, the parents of most students I met especially at the public universities had never undergone higher education. In addition, the emergence of numerous freshly new shopping centres, malls, cafeterias and campus facilities have transformed the public spaces the students take part in. The new towering flats and residential complexes being built around the city force concepts foundational to culture such as home and family, already violently transformed over the past 20 – 25 years due to forced displacement, genocide and war, to yet again undergo reappraisal. And finally, perhaps most pertinent to the students' generational experience, the introduction of new technologies, especially smart phones, the internet and various forms of social

media, has dramatically changed their perceptions of the social contexts amongst which they daily tread. In less than a decade Kurdistan Region has moved from circumstances where the possession of mobile phones, not to mention satellite phones, meant high treason to an era in which smart phones, satellite television, and personal internet connections dominate the urban spheres. This technological transformation is well described by one of my acquaintances, whose father had been particularly interested in new technology:

> "Before 2003 there were few houses that had satellite television. Our house was one of the few that had it. Everyone, our relatives and our neighbours, were so surprised that we had Turkish or French channels. It was unimaginable at the time. After 2003, there was an explosion in the market for these things. Now everyone has satellite television, even more than one satellite, in their homes. And everyone has many televisions at home, even multiple laptops. Similarly, we had in our house one of the first personal internet connections in 2003. No-one had internet at home at the time. Now it's like every single person would have it: I have my own internet and my husband has his own internet. The same goes with my friends. Technology changes things very quickly."

This grand scale transformation is usually assessed through the discourse of development. The term itself, development, is often far from being neutral. First of all, I would argue it is one of the concepts that have been 'falsely universalised' in both academia and lay discourses, much in the same way as for example 'globalisation' has been (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1999; cf. Friedman 2000a). As we de-contextualise a concept or an analytical term, that is, ignore the particular circumstances of its genesis, we also risk becoming blind to the relations of power inherent in its production and reproduction. Second of all, I would claim that as the term implicates essentially a turn for the better, the "subjects" of this development also feel the pressure to prove themselves to be developed, to position themselves at the end of a rectilinear temporal string describing the stages of "before" and "after". In many cases, the turn has undeniably been for the better. Sometimes, however, the results have been far more ambiguous. The first half of this chapter is dedicated to the exploration of this tension. Further on this point of view is broadened in the second half by analysing the processes through which Muslim subjectivities of some of the students are formed and reformed.

6.1 Tensions and transformations

> "To get something positive from globalisation, you have to make sacrifices. You have to give up something else. That's a trade-off. One aspect of your life improves at the expense of some other aspects."
>
> - a female student from a private university

The question of development leads us to a set of concepts that are used almost casually in both lay and academic discourses such as 'modern', 'liberal', 'secular', 'conservative' or 'religious'. As with 'globalisation' or 'development', the abundance of these concepts' appearances in different contexts, however, normalises them and hides the relations of power embedded in them. There is a considerable political, economic and educational asymmetry between societies such as Kurdistan Region which have only recently been integrated into the capitalist world-system and the Global North at the very core of this same system. I would like to suggest this hierarchical asymmetry is also implicit in the ways we talk about ourselves and each other, and in the process it forces those further away from the core to define themselves according to discursive standards which have been developed at the core. The modern subject, and indeed modernity itself, is modelled after the Western secular Protestant[130].

It is of utmost importance to note that by no means I am suggesting that, for example, the hope for a greater level of personal self-determination is a Western construct imposed from the outside on the life of a Kurdish university student. What I am saying, instead, is that these hopes often find their expression through a particular vocabulary and a set of symbols that can generally be ascribed to the dominant Western-born neoliberal tradition. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999), as well as Friedman in his response to their analysis (2000a), suggest, these are vocabularies essentially formulated and transmitted by the elites in any given social surroundings. Having said that, I will also acknowledge the fact that in some cases these particular forms of expression may well be the prerequisite for a meaningful discussion about the students' hopes or fears. Another important thing to consider of course is that the wide-spread usage of concepts such as modern and liberal naturally lead to alterations in their meanings and one should not make the mistake of expecting concepts to have

[130] My argument follows here Asad's (2009: 20–63) analysis of blasphemy in relation to the Danish newspaper's satirical cartoons about Prophet Muhammad. The concept of modernity and its relation to Islam and the Middle East has been debated extensively, by both European or North American and Middle Eastern scholars and commentators. It is not possible in this research to go through the literature or the arguments in detail, especially because it has been done already elsewhere (Masud, Salvatore & Bruinessen 2009; Tripp 2006). It is sufficient to note that the position I am assuming here is one insisted by Osella & Soares (2009), when the say that 'modernity is always necessarily singular and global, always instantiated locally – *in the West as elsewhere* – within wider configurations of social, political, and economic power and historically specific trajectories.' (ibid. p. 4, emphasis original)

identical meanings in every context or social reality. For example, as I was running a group interview in one of the Slemani's public universities, a female student, who interjected as a couple of men were telling me their fears about the deterioration of both the environment and cultural values, commented on the question of socio-cultural globalisation in the following way:

> "From my point of view globalisation is good, even if there are some disadvantages. It's obviously bad what the oil companies do for the environment here in Kurdistan. But on the other hand they are at least giving some employment opportunities and bringing some money. Culturally, it's also good, because when we're increasingly in contact with the rest of the world's cultures, they can introduce you to good things too, and not only bad ones. Like in the past families forced their daughters to get married a lot earlier, and the girls had no choice. Now one of the best things that have happened is that girls are more free to choose what they do with their lives, when to get married and so on."

There is an important point here in the quote above. When the female student spoke in our group interview session about the more progressive attitudes towards women, her concerns were related to girls' ability to choose the when to marry – the marriage institution itself vis-à-vis any alternative arrangements of cohabiting or romantic involvement was not under revision. Likewise, another female interlocutor who was working in the private sector, and who was very conscious about being modern and building her own career, reflected on the future prospects of employment like this:

> "You know, in my situation you have to put one arm in the public sector and the other in the private sector. Because when I become a mother I will have to resign from my current job. Then I have to choose to ask my husband and my own family to support me financially."

Here it was not the case of if she became a mother, but *when*. No concept or social category is in the end fixed, but malleable and contextually constructed.

Moral ambiguity

In the group interviews held at the campuses I asked the participating students to reflect on their position to the ongoing economic transformation by bringing up two different topics. These were: (I) the students' thoughts on the presence of the many transnational, often Western-led, companies particularly in the region's oil fields, and (II) their relationship with the new mobile technologies at

their disposal. Regarding the foreign companies operating within the Kurdistan Region's oil industry, one widely held opinion was that the companies generally took more than they gave to the region, one male student even went as far as called global oil industry as nothing more than a refined form of colonisation (though this sentiment was in the minority). This stance could be interpreted simply through the tradition of post-colonial critique and the anti-globalisation movements but I want to argue there is a more complex, local dimension to be taken into account.

First of all, many of these students were sympathetic towards the party Gorran ('Change') and were not concerned with left-wing political sentiments but instead subscribed to the nationalist and reformist anti-corruption program of the movement. The conversation also often stayed within the local framework I initially offered and the students were rarely interested in going beyond the national or regional point of view[131]. Second of all, several students were inclined to blame the Kurdistan Regional Government for the situation rather than the companies themselves. This argument essentially takes part in a wider political debate currently going on in the region, as well as within the Kurdish diaspora. It is one that is perhaps rarely invoked by non-Kurdish researchers, journalists or NGOs. Thirdly, it was also suggested to me in several conversations that at the same time the oil deals were helping the Kurdistan Region to gain international recognition as a separate, independent entity. This stance is worthy of some additional consideration, as it points at to what separates the Kurdistan Region from its neighbours and the many peoples and nations in the Middle East in general: its relationship to Western – and Eastern – presence in the region. While nationalist movements in large part of Middle East and North Africa during the 20th and 21st centuries have sought to break free from the imperial powers of the West or the Soviet Union (see for example Kepel 2006; Teti & Mura 2009), the Kurdish nationalist movement's relationship to these very same powers has been a lot more complex. While uprisings against imperial occupation such as the Ottoman or the British presence in the region have often taken place, at the same time the concept of seeking alliance with powers such as the Soviet Union or the United States has been far from alien to the Kurdish nationalist movement[132]. As King (2014, p. 169) notes, 'freedom' in Kurdish nationalism is first and foremost freedom from the surrounding states, not from the West.

[131] It has to be noted here that the explicit regional focus regarding the topic was not because the students would not be interested in the world outside Kurdistan Region or were not knowledgeable about politics elsewhere. For example, in other situations I was, for instance, asked to comment on certain European countries' legislation regarding the bans on religious clothing or prohibitions to build minarets.

[132] Kurds, perhaps because of the harsh treatment they have been subjected to by surrounding states, were probably the only faction which opposed the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq. Babakir Zebari, a former peshmerga commander turned into lieutenant general of the Iraqi army, raised quite a few eyebrows and prompted a visit from the then Iraqi PM Nuri al-Maliki when he stated in a press conference that Iraqi army would not be ready to take over until 2020 (e.g. Chulov August 12, 2010).

Hence, during my time on the campuses the discontent the students felt, too, was essentially often about the means and not the ends – they rarely took issue with the fact that trade agreements were made but rather protested against the conditions of these agreements. Many of the students felt betrayed by Western governments, foreign companies, and investors who had not returned the gift, in the Maussian (Mauss 2011; cf. Carrier 1991) sense. The presumably corrupt[133] Kurdistan Regional Government, in turn, was blamed for setting national interest aside and agreeing to deals which granted them substantial personal gain but contributed far less to the national economy, as the following conversation portrays:

> **Man 1:** I live in Kalar, so I'm only studying here. But what I have observed is that the oil companies give us only very few, if any, high-skilled jobs. It's just the menial jobs for us, I don't know, cleaning and stuff like that. As they reserve all the more demanding work for themselves, what will happen once they leave Kurdistan?
>
> **Woman 1:** They [the oil companies] take more than they give.
>
> **Man 2:** Yes, they take more than they give but who's responsible for that? Our government. Because our government has given them a piece of land or the whole field just like that. It's their oil fields now, not ours. The oil has become *their* oil.
>
> **Man 3:** If there's something wrong, it's with our government.
>
> **Man 4:** Yeah, in my view the problem isn't with the oil companies. Like any other enterprise they seek profit, that's their idea right? But the problem is with what happens to the profits and that's the responsibility of our government. Here lies the hidden income... the main problem is the hidden side of revenue these companies return. I believe a specific political party takes most of it and we don't know how much.

In other words, in the students' opinion the politicians (who stood to gain personally from the oil businesses) were not enforcing regulations on companies who in turn had little concern for the

[133] Several students I met explicitly made the point about at least part of the oil revenues being hidden and nobody knowing where they would go, except that it was widely held that a portion of the region's income ended up in the pockets of the political and the economic elites. These speculations were not unfounded in any case, as according to KRG Commission on Integrity, by 30th of March 2014 only 28 out of 111 Kurdistan Region MPs had filled out forms to reveal their wealth as required (Kurd Net March 30, 2014c). More recently, Kurdistan Islamic Union MP Sherko Jawdat, head of the parliament's natural resources committee, criticised the opaqueness and scarcity of information within the administration (Devi November 13, 2014).

needs of Kurdish society. One female student in her early twenties remarked to me that "a house needs doors": on the one hand, she wanted doorways and not the isolation of Kurdistan Region, but on the other hand, the doorways needed doors – a set of regulations to control on which terms the global markets entered Kurdistan Region.

The students' relationship with new technologies, smart phones in particular, was even more ambiguous. On the one hand many, students said that internet has made them a lot more knowledgeable and allowed them to become more broad-minded through individual exploration on their own terms as they were now, to quote one student, 'literate and well-learned'. Access to a seemingly infinite number of different sources of information was mostly perceived to be a positive thing and mobile phones made it easier to stay in touch with friends. There was a strong sense of personal liberation and growth in the ways how several students reflected on their experiences to me. For the first time on such a major scale, the youth were able to search for information on topics of their choosing without the presence of their families, teachers, employers, imams and other authority figures[134]. On the other hand, many students complained that in some regard their social relationships had deteriorated due to smart phones. They said that people were more concerned with the newest iPhone and its functions than being with each other. One private university student told me, bewildered, that she "did not even know her neighbours". These new technologies have also put a strain on family ties, acting as a substitute for social interaction, as one public university female student commented:

> "When I go to a family visit I see them [her family] with their mobiles, checking Facebook, talking with someone or checking, I don't know, whatever. So after a while I have to leave them again. In the past we would have been chatting and having an interesting time together, but not now because we're using technology in a bad way."

Some students with a more socio-culturally conservative outlook on life, especially those few ascribing to the global Salafi movement, felt these new information technologies were essentially destructive. Internet and new forms of media endangered the Kurdish culture by subjecting people to morals and social values of the wrong kind. In their opinion, the Kurdish identity was unnecessarily challenged by corrupt foreign influences. This standpoint and its implications will be discussed in more detail below. For now, it is sufficient to point out that these arguments are,

[134] This is not to say, of course, that there would not be authority figures around the web as well. However, the process of learning has changed drastically in a sense that information was not solely available through prescribed, already established local pathways and social circles such as mosque sessions, school curriculum, state media or family traditions.

interestingly enough, very much a part of a global neo-conservative Islamic revival perhaps most visibly spearheaded by the Salafist movements. Thus, while nostalgic and somewhat parochial in rhetoric, they are in fact very much modern and international themselves.

Even without overtly socio-culturally conservative undertones, or articulating their concerns through religious sentiments, several students were critical of people "caring only about themselves" and what they perceived as rampant consumerism and the obsession with owning property, on the one hand, and the compulsion to amass more and more wealth, on the other. Indeed, shiny new pick-ups, massive Land Cruisers, Land Rovers and Chevrolets similar to those crowding the streets of the city were also parked in numbers on the large campus car parks, and latest smart phone models were being exhibited during lunch breaks and between lectures. When one night I was bought drinks by a man in his early twenties waving several hundred-dollar notes I was not even surprised any more. Those who could afford it went well overboard, for example bought custom-made license plates which could cost more than the cars themselves. As we were walking past a few shopping malls and design shops a friend of mine studying in a public university, shaking his head, remarked: "You know they say Slemani is the capital of culture? For these people 'culture' means fashion."

However, while such, almost ritualised, celebration of individual success was also enacted by students who genuinely were considerably well off, for many it was simply a vehicle for trying to match, whether they could afford it or not, the stereotype of prosperity spread like a canvas over the new emergent middle classes and upper middle classes of the urban centres around the region. The point I would like to suggest here is that the students were intellectually and socially deadlocked[135] in a position where they, on the one hand, were intentionally taking part in an exhausting cycle of success performance and, on the other, remaining highly conscious and critically reflective of the very same cycle. One student in early twenties crystallised this by commenting that they were themselves to blame and rhetorically asked "why buy iPhone5 if you already have iPhone4?"

If the post-apartheid South Africa is, like Jean and John Comaroff have argued, "trying to construct modernist nation-state under postmodern conditions" (1999, p. 284), more or less the same can be said of Kurdistan Region, a possible future nation-state and nevertheless relatively sovereign at the

[135] There were those students, of course, who did not voice any particular concerns regarding either the consumption culture or the presence of international oil companies. For example, a couple of students I had lunch with at a private university one day more or less took for granted employment in the oil industry and genuinely enjoyed the very same things their peers in public higher education had feistily despised just a couple of days earlier. These two privately educated students' parents also had university education and worked in white-collar jobs in Hewler.

moment already. And while direct parallels cannot be drawn, much like black underclass youth in South Africa, the youth in Kurdistan most tangibly embody the contradictions this state-construction project entails. The uncertainty lingering on the students' lives, from the turbulent politics and a history of violence and persecution and the arbitrariness of their position in higher education to the conflicting loyalties and social roles in public, within the household, as citizens and as individuals, leads to a very particular dynamic process of subjectivity formation. The changing, fluctuating identities and presentations of these identities are a condition hardly unique to Kurdish youth. In fact different social roles and socially constructed persons are more or less widely taken for granted in contemporary social sciences[136]. However, my aim here in making this argument is to draw attention to the processes and motivations pertinent to students in the Kurdistan Region. There is a distinct reality where urban spaces, everyday technology, and the society's economy have changed drastically seemingly overnight while much of the socio-cultural, communal and political structures, within which these changes take place, have not done so in a fundamental way. And if anything, many existing configurations of power have become even more entrenched. Thus the students are simultaneously trying to interact with and transform their surroundings as loyal family members, as Kurds, as the descendants of the persecuted, as the new generation, as modern world citizens and neoliberal market agents. One thread from this process of the realisation of meaningful subjectivity is religious and moral self-reformation as a Muslim.

6.2 Free to choose, forced to make a stand: religion and identity

> "All the [Abrahamic] religions are different and their books are different. And as it says in the Qur'an, you are free to choose between any of them. But remember that Islam is the latest. The last message from God came to the Prophet Mohammad. And when you are reading this message [the Qur'an] you'll find out that even if they [in Prophet Mohammad's times] destroyed all the other books before them, they respected all the religions nonetheless. The message from Qur'an is clear to anyone who reads it. It means all the people, not just Muslims, they're free to choose their faith. This applies to Kurdistan too."
>
> A public university student

[136] For a classic formulation of these aspects of human life, see Erving Goffman (1963; 1971) & Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1984). A more recent take on social construction, which partly informs my theoretical understanding of the subject, is posited in relation to gender by Raewyn Connell (2005).

The lecture halls and seminar rooms in many of the universities in Slemani have an interesting spatial quality to them, namely that they are almost desolate. Granted, when packed with students it is like any other class room but nevertheless the atmosphere is that of a temporary arrangement. It is as if the rooms had been built and but never used until now, this very moment. The massive pale white walls devoid of any signs, posters, decorations or furniture, little piles of construction dust in the corners, and curtains which are firmly closed for most of the time. Despite traffic jams in the scorching heat outside, the air-conditioning keeps the air inside cool and in motion. It is the same feeling of not being ready yet that penetrates the entire city with its countless construction sites and refurbishment projects.

It was in one room like those described above that I was asked by a public university economics major whether I thought religion[137] to be an obstacle to economic growth or not. After squirming a little at the apparent banality of, and the discomfort caused by, such an inquiry I replied that I did not think religion as such was any kind of a hindrance. However, the question actually was far from banal as it directly commented on the constitutional separation of economics and religion, the basis of the post-Enlightenment European tradition on which many of our contemporary institutions are founded, namely the secularisation thesis. According to Asad (2003, p. 181) it is postulated by the secularisation theorists that essential to the development of modernity is, (I) increasing structural differentation of social spaces, the separation of politics, religion, economics, science and so forth; (II) the privatisation of religion within its own sphere; and (III) the declining social importance of religious belief, commitment and institutions. My unease towards the student's question was understandable. As an anthropology student I had learned that there was no singular, monolithic religion but a myriad of different configurations of tradition, morality and belief, all dependant in the historical and geographical context in which they manifested in, and I had not faced the Weberian notion of modernisation particularly often. The reason for the student's question was soon apparent, as I realised she was intentionally probing into my standpoint towards the secularisation thesis, an act which I would encounter several times during my time in Slemani.

To my surprise, actually many of the devoutly religious students I met had from the outset a defensive stance regarding their faith as if they were being interrogated. I initially thought that there was something about my behaviour or the questions I posed. However, I soon accepted that it was not necessarily me but what I represented a priori: a Westerner, embodying certain political, economic, and ethical configurations. To some I represented an ally or a vehicle in globalising the

[137] It is useful to note here that when talking about religion, the students almost exclusively meant Sunni Islam.

Kurdish cause even further, and to others I was somehow one of the Europeans who had looked the other way when Kurds faced the worst imaginable atrocities. Nonetheless, there was something inherently European (and Christian, regardless of my personal non-religious conviction) about me, which at once entangled me in the webs of different global social, political, religious, economic, and cultural debates. There was nothing wrong with it, though, as this kind of entanglement was what my work was ultimately about in the first place. My role in the field was that of the interrogatory ethnographer, with a notebook and a digital recorder, being constantly recast into different equally ambiguous role expectations.

When we are looking for the roots of this ambiguity there are two fundamental explanations. First, we have to consider that Islam, especially visible and devout Islamic faith, has become globally fiercely contested. On the one hand, this is due to social reform and a critique of established power becoming increasingly articulated through religious discourses and, on the other hand, the global economy and power hierarchies in the Middle East, as well as in relation to the Middle East, have turned into more and more polarised and volatile from the 1980s onwards. Oil trade, the Israeli strategy in Palestine, the 9/11 attacks, the two Gulf Wars, the expansive spheres of power (Europe, the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran), the exponentially penetrative transnational cores, and global claims to religious leadership all have a role in these processes. And Kurdistan Region is right in the middle of it all.

Second, we have to return to the secularisation thesis and its implications for both the global academic and political discourses on Islam and the everyday social realities of Kurdistan. While there is no point in going through the history of Middle Eastern societies' engagement with expansive global capitalism, especially because others have already done it with remarkable scrutiny (e.g. Tripp 2006), three aspects, which apply to Kurdistan as well, have to be pointed out here. First of all, like in all societies globalised capitalism (i.e. the world-system) has fundamentally transformed the existing logics of exchange, trade, and work. Second of all, established social structures have been, for better or worse, altered in the many ways that the ethical, religious or jural legitimacy enjoyed by existing social practices have to be revaluated over and over again. Finally, these transformations, and the pervasiveness of the world-economy, have engendered a myriad of new (and often mutually unsatisfactory) ways how individuals and communities interact with the state to which they are subjected to.[138] Intellectuals and politicians throughout the Middle East have

[138] The claim that capitalism would be "without ideology", and that expanding world-economy would be either a necessity or ultimately beneficial to everyone, obviously has little empirical grounds. This attempt to circumscribe our understanding is close to what Georg Lukács referred to as 'phantom objectivity' (Lukács 1971, pp. 83–84).

analysed these phenomena and formulated responses to the challenges global capitalism has provided (Tripp 2006), and it is obvious from their varying stances as much as from the "ordinary peoples'" that systematic, unavoidable secularisation as promoted by European Enlightenment, and prophecised especially by 19th and 20th century social scientists, has never happened. As Dahlgren and Schielke point out, 'the ways religions interact with processes of modernisation has not made them secondary in the lives of 'modernising subjectivities'' (2013, p. 1).

Instead, different convictions, movements, and ambitions oscillate around, as much as directly affect, the larger global processes. Some organise in support of, and other against, the endless accumulation of capital on which the world-system is based, but nevertheless there are as many different reasons for each as there are different projects, assemblages, organisations or ideologies. Yet, the major proprietors[139] in global world-economy, much like state's functions for James C. Scott (1998), have the tendency, for the sake of simplification and manageability, to ignore practices which do not ascribe to the dominant ethos of the Global North. The relevance of all this to my work is that the students I met in Slemani seemed to, consciously or unconsciously, embody and reproduce this multifaceted ambivalence. The ambiguity in the students' perceptions seemed to have a lot to do with the expectation of the web of contradictions (North/South, global/local, secular/religious, unilateralism/cooperation, trust/pragmatism, continuity/rupture et cetera) to manifest over the course of our interaction.

The global subject

Practising religion is, as mentioned already, also a very personal matter. As religion as an institution is inseparable from the wider social context (economically, politically, and historically) it manifests in at any given time, so are different aspects of practice interconnected to both personal and collective ethics and social mores. And equally intertwined are an individual's perceptions of his or her place in the wider social context with the ways how those ethics and social mores are developed and practiced. What I sensed in Slemani was a social imaginary and a political and historical context where everyone had to consider a position towards religions, whether they subscribed to a particular faith or not.

Similarly, as Wacquant (2012) reminds us, with neoliberalism we are specifically dealing with a political, not economic, project.

[139] This class would essentially consist of large global financial institutions, transnational corporations, and different individuals within the different cultural, political and economic elites. In fact, because they are largely beneficiaries in the globalised world, also a good number of people living at the core of the world-system can be included too.

Several anthropologists have observed how Islamic transformations have for some time, and in recent decades even more so, been tied to moral reform and aspiration towards a greater degree of social justice. The political (for example, contempt towards inequality, corruption, and state-sanctioned violence, among others) has increasingly been framed as a religious and ethnical quest. For instance, John R. Bowen (2012, pp. 174–180) finds similar, and interconnected, quests among Muslims in diverse locations such as France and Egypt. Similarly, Rudnyckyj (2009), whom I mentioned in Chapter 2, has written about Indonesian factory workers who strive to overcome social problems and the fierce economic competition in the industry through modern Islamic life-coaching programs. Religion also mobilises[140]. Islamist parties and factions have emerged as major power brokers in the countries which underwent regime changes and series of uprisings collectively known in the media as the "Arab Spring". The catastrophic Syrian civil war gained a character which became increasingly constructed in religious terms as the conflict was escalated and prolonged. With Saddam Hussein trying to restore his global power by reinventing himself as the defender of Sunni Arabs, the same can be said of Iraq from the 1980s onwards. Equally important are Islamic charities around the world, both doing relief work and aiming at socio-moral reform. All of these aspects of social reform and mobilisation have an immense impact because they do not only offer an alternative politicised program, but also affect an individual in person, influence his or her sense of self-worth, and allow social relations to be restructured in a way which is hoped to be more meaningful.

One important issue to consider is that after Prophet Mohammad the world's Muslims have never had an authority figure like for example the Catholics do in the form of the Pope in Vatican. Thus, local traditions and pre-Islamic faiths have remarkably influenced the ways in which Muslim practices have been instantiated. Similarly, socio-cultural encounters, political reformations, and wars have contributed to a very varied understandings of Islamic faith. Obviously, this is the case with any world religion, but the key point here is that in a vast area historically comprised of such different localities such as Andalusia, Persia, and India there really has not been a single source of earthly authority[141] behind which the world's Muslims would be rallying. As Mahmood Mamdani (2002) has argued, Islam is as extraterritorial and historical as Christianity or Judaism. Nevertheless, adherence to Islamic tradition(s) and history also connects and unites different communities and locations. There are, thus, two aspects to being a Muslim which have to be looked

[140] This was, after all, one of the aspects of Iranian revolution in 1979 too. For example, according to Fischer (1980), as the Shah's regime suppressed political opposition and social movements, dissidence and political reform were increasingly expressed in "non-political" religious terms, and with a now well-known outcome. Diane Singerman (2003) argues that Islamic networks in (and across) authoritarian states specifically articulate political activism that cannot be produced through official channels.

[141] Even within the caliphate, highest authority was never uncontested: there was ultimately a great degree of political jockeying and religious heterodoxy (see for example Kadri 2011).

at before we return to Slemani. First of all, Islamic traditions and Muslim experiences vary in different spatial and temporal realities, as well as different societies, communities, and power hierarchies. Second of all, these different sites where Muslim experiences manifest are nonetheless interconnected through flows of knowledge[142], memories, histories, and politics. This is Bowen's (2012) point too, as I interpret it. Asad (1996) is also useful in conceptualising this perspective, when he argues that Islam is 'a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges' (ibid. p. 388).

Once we fuse the history and contemporary economic and political realities of Kurdistan Region with Asad's understanding of Islam quoted above, we are close to answering the question motivating and directing my research, which is how changes in religious sentiments and rapid economic transformations intersect, and how the students' Muslim subjectivities are formed. The global Muslim subjectivity, as it is constructed among the students of Slemani, is comprised of all those aspects of a discursive tradition outlined by Asad above. In the face of uncertainty, through moral fashioning the individual is able to transcend the surrounding social circumstances by embarking on a quest of personal meaning-making. This process of reform also involves the individual's social life-world: through active participation in religious discussions and the observance of the routines of piety he or she seeks to exert his or her influence over friends, kin, and the entire community. On the other hand, the religious and moral self-fashioning is likewise an act of resistance: resistance to the uncertainty which is rooted in local histories as well as unequal global economy. Appropriate knowledge is knowledge about the errors of society, markets, and traditions, but it is also knowledge about the right ways of being a proper Muslim – discussed globally, and reproduced locally.

What does this mean in practice? Let us look at some of the ways how some of the religious students described to me how their relationship to Islam had improved. One student in a public university told me that "I'm one of those who follow meticulously conversations and debates on Facebook and other channels. You see, through internet and television and so on. It is because of this that my personal relationship [to faith, to God] has improved". His friend insisted that "it all depends on how you use them, and where have you got access to. Now I read a lot more religious texts than course textbooks, it wasn't like this five years ago." In another situation, a female student reflected on her own moral quest in similar fashion, she said that "with religion it's now much

[142] This knowledge includes texts such the Qur'an and the hadith, both of which are read, analysed, and debated in nearly all groups, communities, or societies of Muslims. The hadith is essentially a corpus of stories of the Prophet's life. Which hadiths are real, informative, useful, or suitable is also a matter of debate.

better. That's because technological change has helped us to get information through internet as well. On Qur'an, on Islam, on everything. We are constantly improving our reading [of religious texts]."

There are two logical strands to be followed here. The primary elements I have observed the devout Islam to consist of in Kurdistan Region are personal morality, through modesty, honesty, and commitment to God, and observance of Qur'an's teachings. In other words, Islam is about the "right kind of way of life". However, the dimension which directly communicates with the social reality haunted by uncertainty, inequality, and the history of turmoil is important here. Islam conceptualised this way as a personal and social reform in Kurdistan Region stands in contrast to the prevalent structures of governance, corruption, militarisation, and unequal trade relations (and the socio-cultural realities which are presumed to produce or uphold them) – structures and processes which are interpreted to disrupt moral success and the construction of a just society where the prolonged sense of emergency no longer dominates. This point of view, which is also shared by the major Islamist parties in Kurdistan[143] even though their political programs might differ, seeks to place the political system to stand trial for its shortcomings on the one hand, and interrogates the individual, urging him or her to do something about the current situation, to restore his or her political agency and embody change through piety, on the other[144]. It is the resistance which gave birth to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (e.g. Teti & Mura 2009, p. 9; Bowen 2012, p. 175), which has transformed into a global Islamist Salafist movement. This is also the kind of activism that spreads informally through not only mosques, but also channels the students are apt at using such as Facebook and Youtube. Despite the fact that this sentiment, or discursive tradition, portrays itself as traditional and aspiring towards pure Islam, it is a thoroughly modern social movement, as Teti and Mura (ibid.) argue in relation to Muslim Brotherhood. To a degree, this is also what Singerman (2003) is trying to conceptualise.

Another, less political and more personal, strand is how the students use their faith, or newfound faith, to communicate the immanent uncertainty they are witnessing around them. I have discussed this before, but it merits further consideration. This is the more common pattern or discourse I came across during the course of my fieldwork. Like the restoration of political agency, it centres on ways and means to produce a personal change through moral and religious reform. However, it is far more concerned with improving one's personal life. It seeks to explore and redefine the questions of status, authority, and success. This is what the female student described as "improving our reading".

[143] These are Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, Kurdistan Islamic Union (connected to the Muslim Brotherhood), and Kurdistan Islamic Group.

[144] This is, in a way, also one of the dimensions of the piety movement in Cairo that Mahmood (2012) addresses.

It does not seek to challenge socially or politically the prevailing circumstances inasmuch as it proposes to rise above them by reading and rereading them in connection with religious knowledge. This is as connected with improved communication technologies as the other strand analysed above. It is precisely the kind of unbounded individual exploration free of traditional authorities I have mentioned earlier[145]. A male student in one of the group interviews pointed to these processes when he suggested in reference to terrorism that "in Afghanistan, because they are deprived of technological products, Islamism reached them in a bad way. The more improved reading of Islamic texts, which is facilitated by advances in technology, helps us to understand Islam in a good way and not through terrorism."

One final point, and this pertains to Asad (1996, p. 388) again, is directly related to the production of knowledge, and how it is produced, reproduced and appropriated in various constellations of global and local tropes. During one of the group interviews a student asked my opinion on the law proposed in Switzerland which aimed at banning the building of minarets. He expressed his discomfort at such a law and asked "why Muslims are being oppressed in Europe while Christians are free in Muslim countries?" This question can be divided into two components. First of all, there was the sense of global solidarity with Muslims being oppressed elsewhere, and it connects to a set of debates globally mobilising the Islamist reformers and their followers, and transcended the standard position of disapproval of KRG policies. Second of all, it made a claim about tolerance towards Christians that is a clear exaggeration, given that relations between Christians and Muslim administrators are often as uneasy in many Muslim-majority regions as they are the other way around in Europe. Why would he make the claim? It is not important whether he sincerely believed it or not, what is important is that it fit perfectly into the social imaginary the more conservative of my interlocutors often articulated: the sense of a higher morality being besieged. I would argue this assertion is part of an ongoing discourse which identifies (and constructs) parallels between local and global meanings, grievances, and socio-economic realities. It is a process where the Kurdish narratives of victimhood become intertwined with the global Muslim narrative of oppression. It seemed to encompass a shared Muslim identity, or an idea of shared Muslim identity, transcending any other borders or frontiers (discursive or geographical), and at the same time instantiated in a very particular social environment: a lecture hall at a university in Kurdistan Region.

[145] As Bowen (2012, p. 32) argues, these processes do not constitute "democratisation" of religious knowledge (common practitioner vis-á-vis religious clergy, for example) as such, but nonetheless the forms of exploring and transmitting religious knowledge have increasingly diversified.

Faith, society, and terror

I have proposed that religious practices and traditions are evoked and negotiated in a very complex web of power relations, cultural norms, historical trajectories and social-economic realities. There is one further aspect to this argument that I wish to discuss. As I noted earlier in Chapter 3, the historical relationship between the two "-isms", nationalism and Islamism, has been somewhat problematic in Kurdistan Region. The same is true in the present[146]. One is forced to balance between various aspirations and processes, and reflect on whether or not these are mutually exclusive – and if they are, to what degree. Should Kurdistan Region remain a federal entity within Iraq or should it become independent? Would an Islamic state be preferable over national sovereignty? What is the configuration between nation, state, and faith in the first place?

These questions were as timely as ever when the increasingly brutal civil wars in Syria and the rest of Iraq spread to the KRG, as ISIS began its onslaught against the Kurdistan Region while at the same time people from Syria and Iraq, displaced by religiously framed hatred, were looking for refuge inside Kurdish borders. Another matter was that certain Salafi groupings in Kurdistan Region had been supportive of the uprising against President Assad's regime in Syria, with youth, in solidarity to their Syrian fellow practitioners, joining the Islamist Sunni factions in the war[147]. This solidarity towards other Sunnis, too, became brutally challenged as ISIS attacked the Kurdish regions. In fact, during my fieldwork the essence of Islam was also debated, even if religious debates were most of the time circumscribed to *piazzas*, teashops or social networking sites instead of lectures or major media. The majority of the participants in this debate fell into two opposing groups. One argument, made often by secular intellectuals, was that the acts of ISIS' were in fact in line with Qur'an's teachings. Because of this either the abandonment of Islam or a major historical and hermeneutic reapprisal of Qur'an together with a theological reform was needed. The opposing argument, however, was that what ISIS did was completely against the Qur'anic message, and that opposition to the insurgents was a legitimate jihad. Both sides could also support their arguments by quoting Qur'an or other religious texts. Largely these questions remain unresolved, and I did sense a part of the defensiveness I have mentioned earlier to be connected with these contradictions too.

There is another matter to consider here in connection with religious reform or assertiveness and terror and their socio-political dimensions. It is one that concerns specifically the Ansar al-Islam

[146] For instance, according to an article in Rudaw (Soran Bahaddin July 27, 2013), in 2013 KRG administration fired 45 Islamic clerics, some on charges of defamation. Some of the supporters of the clerics, as well as the clerics themselves, suggest these decisions were made because they were critical of the KRG in their sermons.

[147] Momen Zellmi & Harem Karem (December 12, 2013).

organisation[148], which still has a presence of some degree in Southern Kurdistan. While the group does not enjoy particularly huge support in the region, they have continued their activities and it is claimed that they are responsible for recruiting young Kurdish men to fight in Syria for Al-Qaeda affiliated factions such as the al-Nusra Front. Also Ansar al-Islam is globally connected: for example, in the autumn of 2012 Switzerland was told to have arrested two Kurdish brothers for their membership in the group (Kurd Net October 1, 2012b). Likewise, in January 2015 Finland ordered the deportation of a Kurdish man, a British national, affiliated with the same group who was convicted of spreading propaganda and recruiting people to a terrorist organisation (Härkönen January 15, 2015). Also the Slemani-born founder of the faction, Mullah Krekar, wanted for terrorism charges by the KRG and a refugee in Norway, made it recently to the headlines again as his prison term for making death threats against several people (including the leader of the Norwegian Conservative Party) was about to end and Krekar contemplated a return to Kurdistan Region (Kurd Net December 25, 2014d).

I think it is noteworthy that Ansar al-Islam has traditionally been most active in the Slemani governorate and yet none of my acquaintances, regardless of their religious conviction, made an explicit reference to the group. It is extensively covered by the Kurdish media, less than ten years ago it used to carry out attacks with explosive devices, and the majority of its local influence and aggression was focused on the very same areas my interlocutors now lived in. Why? There are several possible explanations. Might it be that they considered it gave the region a bad reputation, and as my hosts they could not have any of that? On the other hand, they had no issues whatsoever with giving me the most rotten possible image of the local political structures. Or perhaps the very fact that Ansar al-Islam existed challenged their own perception of their faith, which they saw as ultimately constructive, not destructive? This alternative was not probable either, because my religious interlocutors had no problem with vocally distancing themselves from ISIS. I would suggest that Ansar al-Islam has certain characteristics, which make it stand out a lot less than other factions working with more or less similar agenda (the forceful establishment of a societal order based on a particular interpretation of Islamic religion and jurisprudence). First of all, unlike ISIS or al-Nusra Front who have their own structures and forces, Ansar al-Islam seems to have diffused into existing political parties and movements. Second of all, they have a particular regional, or domestic, appeal in being able to tap into both the Kurdish biographies of victimhood and the perceived corruption of local political system, articulating their goals through rhetoric which transcends the ordinary discourses motivating Sunni insurgency around Middle East. Thus, if, as Mamdani (2002)

[148] Ansar al-Islam has been discussed in Chapter 3.

has argued, “terrorism” and “fundamentalism”, too, are inherently modern political projects, then I would say Ansar al-Islam is the prime example.

Picture 7: PUK and Gorran banners on the outskirts of the Slemani bazaar.
(Photograph by Ville Laakkonen)

7. Conclusion

> 'The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule.'[149]

I began my analysis in Chapter 3 by charting Kurdish history, especially in interrelation to the state of Iraq, through historiography and reminiscences as they are usually articulated in connection with these events by scholars and ordinary people alike. Moving further, gradually in Chapter 4, but even more so from Chapter 5 onwards, I have tried to bring forth the 'ethnographically visible' against the backdrop of this history including the social and economic configurations it entails. The single biography of a nation has been, thus, transformed into the many different biographies, personal reflections and narratives of my interlocutors, which sometimes converge and sometimes diverge from one another. Especially Chapter 6 examined Islam as both a societal force and a personal moral quest, emphasising its connection to the wider constellations of history, power relations, economy, and processes of cultural reproduction.

As many scholars of Kurdistan's religions (e.g. Kreyenbroek 1996) emphasise, majority of Kurds identify as Muslims, and Islam has a long history in connection with the various moral, cultural, and political processes of the region. It would seem to me that while a link between the perceived transformation (and intensification) of religiosity on Kurdistan Region's campuses and wider global religious mobilisations in relation to Islam can be established, there are also certain particularly Kurdish elements to be discerned from my ethnographic account. These elements I have decided to simply define as uncertainty. This is not to say that there would not be uncertainty in other parts of the world, nor is it to imply that the future prospects of a student elsewhere in Iraq (or Palestine, or Bosnia et cetera) would not be conditioned by histories of violence. Instead what I have been trying to do is to point out to how these conditions play out particularly in Kurdistan Region.

Uncertainty about the economic situation, about violence, and about social status are all interconnected. Also, they are neither the only possible sources of uncertainty nor solid and static by nature as categories. They are fluid and dynamic. The sense of uncertainty is also connected to other aspects of human life such as health and friendship. However, I will argue that majority of the

[149] Walter Benjamin (1999, p. 248).

different aspects of social and political life of my acquaintances in Kurdistan Region are circumscribed by economic prerequisites, immanent violence, and ambiguity about one's social standing. What the students' parents had done during the 1980s and 1990s could have an effect on who the students could marry, their plans to continue to postgraduate studies abroad could be curtailed by the fact that their passport said 'Republic of Iraq', and their socio-economic prospects could be contingent on political decisions that were made hundreds or thousands of kilometres away. These are not only very palpable examples of uncertainty, but at the same time an indication of how uncertainty also has an international dimension.

The ambiguity inherent in the transformations or intensifications of religious sentiments among the students' lives is that while it was in part formed as a counter-discourse to a number of wide-reaching global processes, it was also facilitated and encouraged by other processes with equally global scope. For example, those who criticised the transnational oil companies for exploiting the environment would at the same time be beneficiaries of the global information networks which have largely developed in connection with the expansive capitalist markets. Likewise, those who vouched for the return to traditional "Kurdish values" readily engaged with social, political, and technological structures which were anything but "traditional". The foundational question which motivated my study was how rapid economic change and alterations in religious sentiments intersect. As an answer, and this is only one of the possible answers which further long-term study could result in, I would propose that rapid economic change, which I have identified as connected with reintegration into an ever-expanding world-economy, precisely precipitates these alterations. It is not reactionary as such, but rather a new way to formulate questions about subjectivity and inequality. Likewise, it is not more democratic or a priori liberatory in itself, but definitely an indication of a more polyphonic, and challenging, myriad of life-worlds, religious knowledge production and social demands.

Many questions arising from my research have not been answered in this thesis, or at best they have been only briefly touched upon, such as the diasporic reality of Kurdishness, the ambiguity of global religious movements' relationship to the idea of a nation, the actual role of advisors, consultants, and other neoliberal experts employed by the KRG to hammer a particular social order in place, and so on. However, I hope I have succeeded in arguing that common assumptions about war, religiosity, and economy should be seen as far more complex issues than what is often the case.

I have written about Kurdistan Region from the world-systemic perspective, sometimes also drawing comparisons to other societies and states. This is also where the more general applicability

of my findings, if there is any, rises from: if, to understand Kurdistan Region we have to look at such diverse locations such as Bosnia, Guinea Bissau, India, Iran, Latin America, Northern Ireland, and Rwanda, it means that whatever we find in Kurdistan Region can, in turn, help us to understand similar processes in other parts of the world, no matter how seemingly “distant” they are according to conventional thinking.

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