

Kurdish overrepresentation among Danish Islamic State warriors

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News

On 10 February 2018 Vedat Sariboga, a 27-year-old Turkish citizen of Kurdish origin, was sentenced to five years in jail by a Danish court for having gone to Syria to join Islamic State (IS).¹ In addition, the prosecution demanded his expulsion to Turkey and a permanent ban on entry to Denmark. Sariboga's family descends originally from the Kurdish village of Tavsancali in Konya province in central Turkey. He has lived since childhood in Vestegnen (the Western part of Greater Copenhagen), where many immigrants from Konya and their descendants live.

Summary

The article discusses the possible reasons why Kurds are apparently overrepresented among Danish Islamic State warriors. Research on Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin joining IS is also presented, since it also suggests a corresponding overrepresentation.

Key Words

Islamic State, Denmark, Turkey, overrepresentation, Kurds

About the Author

M. Ümit Necef is an associate professor. He works on a 4-year project financed by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE) on the motivations of young Swedish and Danish Muslims to join Islamic State (IS) and other jihadist groups.

Analysis:

Vedat Sariboga is the latest addition to a long list of Kurds stemming from Turkey, Iraq or Iran, who have gone to Syria to fight for the Islamic State. Denmark's Center for Terror Analysis (CTA) and the Kurdish journalist Deniz Serinci estimate that the number of people who left Denmark for Syria and Iraq since the summer of 2012 to join militant Islamist groups is at least 150.¹ According to Serinci, who is one of Denmark's most prominent investigative journalists working on IS and who has written books and articles on the group's activities in Denmark, 26 of these persons are of Kurdish origin, and thus up to every fifth Syria-warrior from Denmark is of Kurdish origin.² He states that these numbers suggest an overrepresentation of Kurds in the ranks of Danish IS-warriors.

19 of the 26 Danish-Kurdish IS-Kurd warriors stem from the Konya Province in central Turkey.³ Four of them originate from Kermanshah in Iranian Kurdistan, and at least 3 from Iraq. Here is a list of the Danish Syria warriors of Kurdish origin. The names of the villages or cities they stem from are in parenthesis:⁴

From Turkey: The sisters Hazal and Leyla Olgun and their elder brother U. O. (Kusca); Enes Ciftci (Kusca); Y. K. (Kelhasan) and her husband Ö. K. (Kütükusagi); Ö. K.'s cousin S. K. (Kütükusagi); H. Y. (Kelhasan); T. B. Y. (Bulduk); C. O. (Haymana).⁵

From Iraq: Rawand Taher (Erbil); Yaqoub Ali and Rekan Mahmoud Ali Muhammad (Sulaimaniyah); Azad Masoudi and Sardar Masoudi (Ramadi, but the family is originally from the town of Sarpol Zahab, Kermanshah, Iran).

From Kuwait: Mohammad Rostom.

Three aspects are noteworthy in this list. First, Kusca, Kütükusagi, Kelhasan and Bulduk all lie in Konya province and are within a circle with a radius of 15-20 kilometers. The Kurds of Konya were forced to migrate from Adiyaman province in

¹ Center for Terroranalyse (CTA) 2018: Assessment of the terror threat to Denmark. PET, Copenhagen.

² Serinci, Deniz Berxwedan 2017: Hver femte IS'er fra Danmark er kurder (Every fifth IS-warrior from Denmark is Kurdish). <http://jiyan.dk/2017/04/hver-femte-iser-fra-danmark-er-kurder/>

³ Serinci, Deniz Berxwedan 2018: Fem års fængsel og udvisning til dansk-kurdisk IS-kriger (Five years imprisonment and expulsion to Danish-Kurdish IS-warrior). <http://jiyan.dk/2018/02/fem-aars-faengsel-og-udvisning-til-dansk-kurdisk-is-kriger/>; Serinci, Deniz Berxwedan 2017: Hver femte IS'er fra Danmark er kurder (Every fifth IS-warrior from Denmark is Kurdish). <http://jiyan.dk/2017/04/hver-femte-iser-fra-danmark-er-kurder/>

⁴ Serinci kindly made this list for me. Personal communication 2 March 2018.

⁵ Though administratively attached to Ankara, Haymana is geographically adjacent to the towns of Cihanbeyli and Kulu which constitute the Kurdish part of Konya province. All the villages mentioned above are attached to the town of Cihanbeyli.

Southeastern Turkey to Konya in the last decades of the 19th century. At the end of the 1960s and in the beginning of the 1970s thousands of peasants from these villages migrated to Denmark through chain migration. Most of them live in Vestegnen (the Western Region of Copenhagen in suburbs such as Ishøj, Brøndby Strand, Høje Tåstrup and Albertslund) and have close family relations through intermarriages. There are smaller concentrations of Konya Kurds in Danish towns such as Odense, Holsterbro and Horsens, but there is no evidence that young Kurds from these areas have joined IS. Secondly, journalists and people who work with radicalization have not yet reported any Kurd stemming from Konya having gone to Syria to join YPG (The People's Protection Units), or any other group to fight against IS. However, Deniz Serinci reported in 2014 that at least ten Danish Kurds have claimed to have gone to Northern Iraq to fight together with the Peshmerga against IS. Two Kurds, one from Iraq and the other from Southeast Turkey, are mentioned in the article.⁶ The third noteworthy aspect to the list is that the Danish media have only reported about two Danish Turks being involved in armed jihadism. The first one, the then 20-year-old Abdülkadir Cesur, was arrested in Sarajevo in 2006 and sentenced to thirteen years in prison by a Bosnian court for planning a terrorist act in Sarajevo.⁷ The other one is a half-Turkish, half-Pakistani young man, the 17-year-old Fatih Khan, who was reported killed in Syria fighting for IS.⁸

Search for reasons

An earlier investigation published in September 2016 by a group of investigative journalists had already suggested the same overrepresentation of Danish Kurds.⁹ It was built on available information on 77 persons of the estimated 138 Danish citizens and denizens and the demographic background of these persons. The findings concerning the ethnic background showed that the biggest ethnic group was the Kurds with 15 persons.

This result was astonishing, since the soldiers of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq (the Peshmerga) and the PKK-associated Syrian group YPG have been fighting a

⁶ Serinci, Deniz 2014: Danske kurdere slås mod Islamisk Stat i Nordirak (Danish Kurds fight against IS in Northern Iraq). *Politiken*, 15 September. See also Serinci, Deniz 2016: De danske kurdere, der kæmper imod IS (The Danish Kurds fighting against IS). 13 February. In this article two more persons are mentioned, both Iraqi Kurds. <http://jiyan.dk/2016/02/de-danske-kurdere-der-kaemper-imod-is/>

⁷ Skjoldager, Morten 2007: Dømt for terrorplaner (Sentenced for terror plans). *Politiken*, 11 January.

⁸ Andersen, Sarah & Ellegaard, Carsten 2013: Hvorfor tog Fatih til Syrien? *Jyllands-Posten*, 24 november.

⁹ Sheikh, Jakob 2016: Syrienskrigere: Danske kurdere topper listen (Syria-warriors: Danish Kurds top the list). 15 September.

bloody war against IS in recent years, and the Kurds as such are often seen in the Western public opinion as a secular and pro-Western people fighting against IS.

Since this finding was a cause of wonder, the reasons behind this overrepresentation have been the topic of several newspaper articles since the publication of the investigation. Jakob Sheikh, who was one of the journalists behind it and the author of a book about Danish Syria-warriors, conducted an interview with the Kurdish journalist Hetav Rojan, who was at the time the Middle East editor of the Danish political magazine *Ræson* (Reason). Rojan did not question the claim on overrepresentation. However, he put forward that the premise itself to categorize the Kurdish Syria-warriors under one homogenous label can be imprecise and at worst misleading. He elaborated that the Kurds should not be regarded as a collectively acting group of like-minded people. He stated that the Kurds as an ethnic group has no monolithic structure, but is in practice split up politically, religiously and culturally.

Some months later, Deniz Serinci and Søren Villemoes investigated the reasons behind the alleged Kurdish overrepresentation in a well-researched article¹⁰ They spoke with people working with the issue both in Denmark and in Iraqi Kurdistan. The chairwoman of Amal Hayat, an organization working to prevent and identify the reasons behind Islamist radicalization, Katina Rasmussen, who has Kurdish roots, told Serinci and Villemoes that between 20 and 26 ethnic Kurds have left Denmark for Syria or Iraq to join ranks with IS or similar organizations out of a total number of at least 135 persons. The journalists add that other sources they have spoken with confirmed this overrepresentation. Rasmussen stated also that several Kurdish women have disappeared from Denmark since 2013. The journalists furthermore write that according to their information at least six Kurdish women have left Denmark to join IS, but they only know the identity of three. They add: “Kurds apparently turn up everywhere, when you look for Danes with IS relations and sympathies”.

Kuffar, not Kurds

Serinci has also asked Yasar Olgun, who stems from the Kurdish village of Kusca in the Konya province and whose daughters Leyla and Hazal had gone to Syria in May 2016 to join IS. He reports Olgun as saying that IS in its propaganda goes out of the way to underline that they are not against the Kurds. That was the reason why, according to him, his daughters were attracted to IS. Yasar Olgun tells Serinci that the IS message is:

¹⁰ Serinci, Deniz & Villemoes, Søren K. 2017: Kurder mod kurder (Kurd against Kurd). *Weekendavisen*, 27 January.

“We have created an Islamic state, in which we live in an Islamic way. The infidels attack us to destroy our state. Our fight is against the infidels. They do not mention Kurds, Turks or Arabs”.

Serinci has also noticed that the IS' former English language on-line magazine Dabiq distinguishes sharply between the Kurds as a Muslim people and “communist” organizations such as PKK. According to him, IS in Dabiq does not emphasize ethnicity, but the common religion Islam. The killed Kurds from PKK, Peshmerga or YPG are not called “Kurds”, but “kuffar” (infidels). This appeals to Kurds who care for religion above ethnicity.

Serinci has also spoken with the psychotherapist Ahmet Demir, who stems from the same village as the Olgun family and who has many years of experience working with immigrants from Konya. He explains the circumstance that so many IS warriors have roots in Konya by pointing to the fact that “Konya has for a long time been the stronghold of religious parties. For example, political Islam’s nestor Necmettin Erbakan was nominated in Konya”.

However, according to Demir, it is ultimately not mostly about religion, but more about the psychosocial background. He elaborates: “All the Danish Kurdish IS supporters, whom I have studied the last three years, had great rupture in the family. One of the supporters’ mother, for example, committed suicide, when she was small”.

Demir thinks that at a time when the youngsters have a superficial knowledge about Kurdishness, when they are rootless and vulnerable, have psychological pains due to loss of a parent, they meet a person from IS, who employs powerful rhetoric. According to him, IS is to all appearances skillful in contacting and luring people to the group.

If the traumatized youngster blames one of the parents for the psychological pain, he/she can punish the parent by going over to IS. It is a huge humiliation for the mother or father, who has sympathies for IS’ enemies, that is, for PKK or the Peshmerga.

Iraqi Kurdish IS warriors

When Serinci and Villemoes present the number of Danish Kurds to Fariq Rashid Kestay, the commander of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Sinjar in Northwest Iraq, he is not surprised. “We meet the same situation also here. My forces sometimes intercept radio messages from IS, where the terrorists speak Kurdish among themselves”.¹¹ The

¹¹ Serinci & Villemoes 2017.

journalists refer to him saying that there is an entirely Kurdish battalion in IS called Saladin Ayyubi Battalion. Saladin was the military commander, who expelled Richard the Lionheart and crusaders from Jerusalem after the battle of Hattin in 1187. Since he was of Kurdish ethnicity, he is perceived as both a Kurdish and Islamic icon.

Another official from the Iraqi Kurdistan, Mariwan Naqshbandi from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) told Serinci and Villemoes that 500 young Kurds from Iraq joined the ranks of IS between 2013 and 2014. Furthermore, there were 600 Kurds from Iran and 800 Kurds from Turkey. Serinci and Villemoes think that his numbers are probably a conservative estimate, since the ministry is only responsible for areas under the control of KRG and not for areas with Kurdish groups such as Kirkuk, Sinjar and Khanaqin. They add that there are no available statistics on Syrian Kurds who also have joined IS.¹²

Naqshbandi told the Danish journalists that the number of Kurds in IS has after all decreased. His explanation was that the initial aim of the Kurds joining IS was to fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, but then IS ordered them to fight against YPG. According to him, IS's war against the Iraqi Kurdish forces, Peshmerga, and the fact that IS executed many of its Kurdish members for treason, are the other reasons why the young Kurds were abandoning IS.

Kurdish overrepresentation among Turkish citizens

In 2014 Günes Murat Tezcür and Sabri Ciftci, respectively the chair of Kurdish Political Studies Program at the University of Central Florida and an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Kansas State University, wrote that according to recent reports, around 1,000 Turkish citizens have joined IS and several hundred have joined Jabhat al Nusra, the al Qaeda branch in Syria.¹³ To get a better sense of these fighters, they generated a database with information on about 112 individuals who joined the jihadists.

They found out that “the types of Turks who have been caught up in the jihadist net make for unusual recruits”.¹⁴ One type of the “unusual recruits” are the Kurds, who are overrepresented in the sample. Close to 50 percent of the sample, 51 recruits, are of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tezcür, Günes Murat and Ciftci, Sabri 2014: Radical Turks: Why Turkish Citizens are Joining ISIS. *Foreign Affairs*, 11. November.

¹⁴ Tezcür & Ciftci 2014.

Kurdish ethnicity. The authors point also to the fact that many Kurds in Turkey traveled to Syria also to fight *against* IS.

In the article Tezcür and Ciftci present an explanation of IS' and other similar groups' appeal to some Turkish citizens, but they don't elaborate on why the Kurds are overrepresented.

Later, Tezcür has expanded his sample by assembling an original sample of 458 Turkish citizens who traveled abroad and fought with jihadist groups since the 1980s¹⁵. Of these individuals, 238 fought in Syria since 2012, and the remaining 220 participated in the previous wars. Tezcür observes that "(a) disproportionate number of jihadist foreign fighters from Turkey are ethnic Kurds". He states that the sample has the records of ethnicity of 326 individuals, 147 of whom – or 44 percent – are Kurds, "well above the Kurdish population of Turkey, estimated at 15 to 20 percent".¹⁶

Tezcür compared also the localities from which the 238 Kurdish jihadis in Syria come from. He observes that those who went to fight for YPG come from localities with strong networks of Kurdish nationalist mobilization. In contrast, jihadists typically come from localities with "dense Islamist networks (i.e., provinces with a history of popular informal brotherhoods and formal piety associations) and relatively weaker Kurdish nationalist presence".¹⁷ The highest percentage of the 238 jihadis come from Konya and Adiyaman with 10 pct. each. Here I would like to draw attention to the fact that the Danish Kurds from Konya originally stem from Adiyaman. I cannot here judge whether this is coincidental, or if it suggests that certain informal religious brotherhoods in Adiyaman continued their presence in Konya after the forced migration at the end of the 19th Century.

Conclusions

The above-mentioned Kurdish journalist Deniz Serinci expresses his astonishment about two Danish IS warriors: "I know a Kurdish father in Vestegnen. He stems from Konya in Turkey. Although he is a supporter of PKK (Kurdistan's Workers' Party), his daughter has joined IS in Syria. Last week I was surprised when I found out that a Kurdish, probably dead, IS-warrior – also from Vestegnen, and again from Konya – is the son-in-law of one of my acquaintances. The latter was a former Peshmerga in the

¹⁵ Güneş Murat Tezcür 2016: Foreign fighters from Turkey. Memo prepared for presentation at the Contemporary Turkish Politics Workshop at Rice University's Baker Institute on 14 October.

<https://pomeps.org/2016/11/01/foreign-fighters-from-turkey/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Iraqi Kurdistan.”¹⁸: He then puts forward the obvious questions: “How come the children of PKK followers and Peshmerga join the IS? Why is every fifth IS-warrior from Denmark Kurdish?”

The explanations presented above probably have a kernel of truth in them. Certain Islamic networks and serious family problems possibly play a role. For my part, I think one of the main reasons for Kurdish overrepresentation is the ideological, religious and political confusion many Kurds live in. In the last decades, the Kurds in Turkey have experienced great social changes. Millions of Kurdish peasants have migrated to Europe and to industrial cities in Turkey. Thousands were expelled from their villages due to armed conflicts between the Turkish army and the PKK guerillas. This led to the fast and chaotic urbanization of the Kurds. Kurds ended up being a people who on the one hand lived with traditional Islam and with premodern social structures, and on the other hand with an armed violent movement, PKK, with strong inspirations from Marxism and feminism. In this respect, it is necessary to remember that approximately half of the Kurds in Turkey have supported either PKK directly or a PKK-inspired legal party. Probably it is this huge social transformation and cultural, religious and political conflicts and confusion which is the main reason for the overrepresentation of Kurds among IS warriors both in Denmark and Turkey.

¹⁸ Serinci, Deniz 2017: Hvordan kan børn af PKK'ere og Peshmerga tilslutte sig IS? (How can the children of PKK supporters and Peshmerga join IS?). Jiyen.dk, 10 April.