

## **Kurdish Muslims Embrace Digital Age**

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From cartoons to lectures on theology, CDs on religious themes are selling fast in the north of Iraq. Kawa Kamal's shop in Sulaimaniyah is doing a booming trade in CDs, DVDs and cassettes of Muslim sermons and other religious material.

Kamal says he is taking about 300,000 Iraqi dinars, around 250 US dollars, a day in CD sales alone, about three times what he was making five years ago. His busy shop in this northeastern city is bustling with customers, who rifle through the collection of 4,000 Islamic CDs, DVDs and cassette tapes.

But for Kamal, the business is not just about profits.

"I want to spread Islam by distributing these Islamic productions," he said as he helped customers make their selection. "I want to make a difference through this business."

The predominantly Kurdish north has traditionally been more secular than other parts of Iraq, which have seen a rise in religious conservatism since the United States-led invasion of 2003. Although the Kurdish region was semi-independent from Baathist rule through the Nineties, media products of any kind were hard to come by as travel and trade were limited, and the impoverished population had little purchasing power.

But here too, Muslim-themed media have gradually been gaining in popularity, with material produced locally and brought in from elsewhere, including Arab countries. Most of the material reflects the Sunni branch of Islam followed by the majority of Kurds.

Sulaimaniyah now has three retail distribution centres and dozens of small shops dealing in Muslim-interest material.

Shop owners say the best-selling CDs are recordings of sermons given by Arab or Kurdish clerics at Friday prayers. But material taken from the various television stations now available in the region is also popular. This can range from films and children's cartoons with an Islamic message to religious music.

One of the favourite imports is Amr Khaled, a popular Egyptian preacher and broadcaster, whom Time Magazine has named as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

It is a lucrative trade, with CDs selling for about 1,000 dinars each and DVDs 1,500 dinars. Copyright issues are disregarded, and traders feel free to record, copy and sell audio and video material at will.

Housewife Shireen Abdulla frequently watches religious programmes on TV, and has come to Kamal's shop to buy some cartoons for her three children as well as recordings of speeches by clerics for herself.

“I want to raise my kids according to Islamic principles,” she said. “I want them to behave like the characters behave in the cartoons.”

A Sulaimaniyah shop owner who asked not to be named said the vast majority of his customers were young people from a variety of backgrounds, but often from outside the city.

“There are villages that don’t have mosques and can’t get Islamic TV or radio stations, so they come to town and buy these products,” he explained.

Recorded speeches are common, some offering theological interpretations of the Koran or of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and others touching on social affairs.

Perhaps the most sensitive material, and of particular concern to the Kurdish authorities, comes when a cleric discusses the need to defend Islam

The owners of Islamic shops need to be licensed by the Kurdish Regional Government’s culture ministry, and in theory should obtain a permit for each individual item they sell, issued by the ministry of endowments and religious affairs, which has the job of monitoring Islamic content in the media to ensure it does not break any laws.

Mariwan Naqshbandi, spokesman for the religious affairs ministry, admitted that with thousands of items on the market, many lack the required permit. He worries that the uncontrolled flow of material could include some items that incite violence, particularly in speeches concerning the defence of Islam.

In May, the security forces in Sulaimaniyah confiscated CDs of Friday prayers sermons condemning a female university professor who had spoken out against social traditions that repress women.

At the same time, Herish Majid, a graduate in Islamic studies, warns that the rules about what can and cannot be said should be applied judiciously, so as not to encroach on freedom of speech.

“Everyone must have an equal opportunity to express themselves – of course, I mean without using violence,” he said.

While many would agree on the need for some regulation, observant Muslims say the messages contained on CD and DVD are positive.

“I listen to these CDs regularly so as to enlighten my life,” said Sirwan Mustafa, a police officer in Sulaimaniyah, as he bought 11 recordings of speeches by a Kurdish cleric.

Mustafa became aware of such recordings of religious material while attending mosques, and now finds they help him do his job in an ethical way.

“I behave according to Islamic principles,” he said. “I respect other people and I don’t attack them.”

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