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The Pioneer of Change at the Crossroads from Sinjar to the Caucasus: Prince (Mîr) Ismail Chol-beg and the Struggle for Modern Yezidi Identity

Abstract:

The Yezidi Prince Ismail Chol-beg (d. 1933) is one of the most intriguing and contested Yezidi figures of the twentieth century. Although his life and activities have been described in several works, including his own autobiography, the question of how he perceived Yezidi identity has remained largely unexplored to date. This study represents the first systematic attempt to analyse his understanding of Yezidi identity and to assess the extent to which it was shaped by the rise of nationalism. To this end, the article first examines Chol-beg's encounters with nationalist ideas, and then reconstructs his concept of Yezidi identity on the basis of his statements and utterances. His reflections on identity are fragmentary and dispersed, making it necessary to draw upon a wide range of sources, such as his letters and other dictated texts, as his autobiography and two published works, reports by European travellers who met him, as well as hitherto unpublished archival materials scattered across multiple languages, including Armenian, Georgian, German, Russian, French, Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and English, they collectively illustrate the broad range of his activities, his networks and his sphere of influence. This study therefore aims to collate and contextualise Chol-beg's references to Yezidi identity in order to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of his thought.

Keywords:

Ismail Chol-beg, Yezidi identity, Yezidis, Yezidi Princes, Ethnicity, Nationalism.

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Introduction

The idea of writing this article emerged from long and extensive discussions between the two authors. Previous scholars had addressed the role of Ismail Chol-beg in historical events, particularly during and after the First World War. Among these were John Guest,[1] Nelida Fuccaro,[2] Abbas al-Azzawi,[3] Jeladet Bedirkhan,[4] Sadiq al-Damaloji,[5] Artur Rodziewicz,[6] and others,[7] who referred to his activities mainly in connection with broader historical developments, without delving into essential details. In many cases, the contributions of these authors were shaped by political or ideological motives, whereby they portrayed Ismail Chol-beg's role in history through the lens of their own intellectual and ideological backgrounds. Given the unreliability of associating Ismail Chol-beg with such specific ethnic, nationalist, or ideological agendas, our research led us to the discovery of numerous new documents from British, Armenian, Georgian, and other archives. These sources reveal conclusions that often contradict the claims made by earlier scholars and studies.

Consequently, we, the authors of this article, found it necessary to present a study on Ismail Chol-beg those highlights both his intellectual contributions to the debate on Yezidi identity and his major political often pragmatic and demagogic roles in defending his people within the broader context of regional political developments, especially the transformations that took place before, during, and after the First World War.

In this regard, we made efforts to collect rare archival materials and made significant contributions by applying rigorous research methodologies to their analysis. These documents constitute the backbone of our argument that Ismail Chol-beg advanced one of the earliest articulations of an independent Yezidi identity, even while manoeuvring among diverse nationalist and political movements in the region. As a prominent and influential Yezidi prince and leader, he sought to exploit every available opportunity to advance the cause of his people amid the sweeping transformations of the early twentieth century.

At the dawn of that century, the traditional way of life of the Yezidis underwent dramatic change. The gradual collapse of the Ottoman Empire during the First World

[1] Guest 1993.

[2] Fuccaro 1997: 559–80; *Eadem* 1999.

[3] Azzawi 1935.

[4] Bedirkhan 1933.

[5] Damaloji 1949.

[6] Rodziewicz 2025: 38–66.

[7] Cf. the list of sources and references provided in the bibliography.

War, the arrival of British and French forces, and the subsequent projects to establish new states and administrations all brought rapid geopolitical upheavals. These developments contributed to the crystallisation of political ideas among leading Yezidi figures, particularly tribal leaders in Sinjar (Shingal), and facilitated the emergence of Prince Ismail Chol-beg as a central figure. His prominence was further reinforced by his earlier visits to various Yezidi communities, including those in the South Caucasus and in Syria before the establishment of the Syrian state.

The British conquest of Baghdad and later Mosul in 1918, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and the establishment of the British Mandate in Iraq marked a decisive turning point for the Yezidis. During this period, nationalism spread among the region's diverse populations. Yet for the Yezidis, the question of ethnic affiliation was not yet contested; rather, there existed a broad consensus on this matter. It was in this context of upheaval and regional transformation that the figure and role of Prince Ismail Chol-beg came to the fore.

Who Was Ismail Chol-beg?

Ismail Chol-beg was born around 1888/89 in Baadre town in n northern Iraq. He was the son of Mir Abdi Beg[8] and a member of the Yezidi princely family.[9] He lost his parents at an early age and thus became an orphan before he had even opened his eyes to the world. Despite being the cousin of the Yezidi prince Ali Beg and the brother of Ali Beg's wife, Mayan Khatun, he endured considerable hardship in his youth. The harshness of life sharpened his character, while his natural instincts led him to embark on various adventures. His intelligence, resourcefulness, and determination often saved him from downfall when confronted with difficult and compromising situations which he would later recount in his autobiography. Over time, he emerged as one of the most exceptional Yezidi figures of the first half of the twentieth century, leaving a distinctive mark on the cultural, social, and political life of his community.

[8] Mir Abdi Beg, the son of Mir Ali Beg I – the Emir (*Mîr*, Prince) of Sheikhan – briefly held the emirate after his elder brother, Mir Hussein Beg, succeeded their father, but was imprisoned by Ottoman authorities in 1875. Although the title "Emir of Sheikhan" is frequently used in both literature and social discourse, the authority of the Emir traditionally extended beyond the area of Sheikhan to encompass all Yezidi regions. Mir Abdi Beg served in this role until his death in 1888/ [1889]. Cf. Chol 1934: 1–2.

[9] Within the Yezidi theocratic system, the Emir functions as the secular head of the Yezidi community, endowed with judicial authority but not serving as the supreme religious leader in the full sense. Rather, spiritual leadership is vested in the Baba Sheikh. Pirbari and Mossaki propose a rough analogy: the Yezidi Emir may be compared to the English monarch as head of the Church of England, while the Baba Sheikh would correspond to the Archbishop of Canterbury (cf. Pirbari and Mossaki 2019, 49–50).

From an early age, he visited Yezidi villages far beyond his hometown, and his journey to the Yezidis of the South Caucasus in 1908–1909 proved particularly formative. He became a strong advocate of education, encouraging the construction of schools in Yezidi villages and promoting learning within the community, an initiative that challenged long-standing taboos in Yezidi tradition. His children were pioneers in this respect: his eldest son became the first Yezidi schoolteacher in Baghdad, and his eldest daughter became the first Yezidi woman to receive a formal education.[10] Ismail Chol-beg himself authored the first published book on Yezidi history and religion. He also urged that Yezidi religious tradition be committed to writing. Inspired by such efforts, many Yezidis began to pursue education, with some attending schools in Sinjar and Sheikhan districts, and Bashiqa and Bahzani towns. Thus, Ismail Chol-beg is widely recognised as a key figure in the advancement of Yezidi education, both in Iraq and in other Yezidi-populated regions.[11] While visiting the Region of the South Caucasus to check on the welfare of the Yezidis there, he raised the matter of the education of the Yezidi there. As a result, responsibility for the Yezidi community in the South Caucasus was placed in the hands of a person named Kabtikos in Yerevan, who was second-in-command to the Armenian Catholicos, Metios II Izmirlian (1908–1910).[12] They promised to start seven schools for the Yezidis and to see to the community's needs.[13]

Ismail Chol-beg also became a political leader, developing close relations with the British and serving as Emir of the Yezidis in Sinjar. He was not untouched by the rise of nationalism during this period; early in his career he came into contact with Armenian and Turkish nationalists, and later with Assyrian and Kurdish nationalist movements.

Despite his significance, no study to date has examined in detail the image of Yezidi identity in Ismail Chol-beg's texts[14] and in contemporary sources about him. We are confronted with two central questions. Firstly, how did Ismail Chol-beg perceive Yezidi

[10] The first educated Yezidi woman was Wansa, a member of the princely family and the wife of Mir Said Beg, then ruler of the Yezidis. She was enrolled at the American School for Girls in Beirut, where she learned English (cf. Guest 1993: 187). She later returned to Iraq in 1933 to pursue her preparatory studies in Baghdad (cf. Zaki 2005: 145–146).

[11] Cf. Ali 2019a: 96.

[12] Matthew II (Mateos II) Izmirlian (1845–1910) was Catholicos of all Armenians from 1908 to 1910. Born Simeon Martiros Izmirlian in Constantinople, he previously served as Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople (1894–1896), where he openly condemned the Hamidian massacres and was subsequently exiled by the Ottoman authorities. After the Young Turk Revolution (1908), he returned from exile and was elected Catholicos of all Armenians at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. He died in 1910 and was buried at Etchmiadzin. (https://www.qahana.am/leaders/141).

[13] Cf. Ali 2019a: 96; cf. also Chol 1934: 21–22.

[14] Ismail Chol-beg was illiterate, and when speaking of his writings in this article, we are referring to texts dictated by him and statements of his that were recorded by others.

identity? Furthermore, to what extent was his concept of Yezidi identity shaped by the currents of nationalism?

In an attempt to address these questions, this article examines a range of sources and documents which form the basis of an analysis of the role of one of the most prominent Yezidi princes in the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, it seeks to establish whether he was aware of the notion of Yezidi identity and how he conceptualised it, by examining his writings and publications, including his autobiography, alongside newly-obtained unpublished documents from numerous archives.

Among these is the original manuscript preserved in the Department of Micrographics at the American University of Beirut, which took considerable effort and extensive correspondence to obtain. Prior to our obtaining it, the manuscript had been dispersed across different sections of the collection and catalogued under various headings. Nevertheless, we have succeeded in assembling, reading, and comparing it with the published version. Our critical review of this publication is presented in the penultimate section of this article.

In addition, we obtained further documents from the Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran) in Armenia. These documents comprise four letters, three of which were authored by Ismail Chol-beg between 1916 and 1919.[15] The documents consist of several sheets of paper (measuring 27 cm × 30 cm) and has a total length of slightly more than five meters. In these letters, Ismail Chol-beg provides a detailed account of the situation of the Yezidis in Sinjar and their struggle under Ottoman rule. Therein, he also recounts the manner in which the Yezidis rescued and sheltered thousands of Armenian refugees. These writings also contain a brief historical overview of the persecution of the Yezidis during the previous two centuries, as well as an appeal for the promotion of education among the Yezidis, which he addressed to the Yezidi leadership in the South Caucasus.

The text of this remarkable document was first published in 1975 by the Yezidi author Karlênê Çaçanî, albeit with minor omissions.[16] Çaçanî interpreted these letters and the activities of Ismail Chol-beg as part of Armenian-Kurdish relations. However, it ought to be noted that the letters themselves deal exclusively with Yezidi subjects and with the relationship between Armenians and Yezidis. The Armenian author

[15] Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (MAT). Hereafter cited as MAT Ord. 240–f–003.

[16] Cf. Chachani 1975: 226–247.

Manuk Muradyan also quoted and analysed this document in his study on the Yezidi leader Usub Beg.[17]

We have also examined and analysed documentation from Newcastle University's Gertrude Bell Archives (United Kingdom), the League of Nations Archives (LON) in Geneva (Switzerland), the National Army Museum Templar Study Centre (NAMT-STC) in the United Kingdom, and the Public Record Office Air Ministry (AIR) in the United Kingdom. We also consulted materials from the India Office Records (IOR) in the United Kingdom, and the Archives of the Yezidi Spiritual Council of Georgia (AY-SCG) in Tbilisi, Georgia.

Dawn of Nationalism: Early Activities, Encounters and Influences

In 1908, at the age of around 20, Ismail Chol-beg undertook a journey to the Yezidis in the South Caucasus, where he stayed for several months until 1909.[18] Several documents by and about Ismail Chol-beg from this time have been preserved. He was recognised by the Yezidis as their emir long after his visit. It was during this trip that he came into contact with Armenian nationalists from the Dashnak party.[19] His collaboration with the Armenians prompted the Ottoman authorities to arrest and imprison Ismail Chol-beg together with several other Yezidis. The origins of this incident can be traced to reports published in the Armenian press, which propagated claims that Ismail Chol-beg intended to lead the Yezidis in converting them to the Armenian Church. Archival records from both Ottoman and British archives contain references to this.[20] However, these reports were unfounded, as Ismail Chol-beg never engaged in any activity aimed at proselytising or converting the Yezidis to another faith receiving the rumours as a potential threat to public order, the Ottoman authorities responded by arresting Ismail Chol-beg together with seventy-five Yezidis.[21] Ultimately, these accusations could not be substantiated, so Ismail Chol-beg was released.

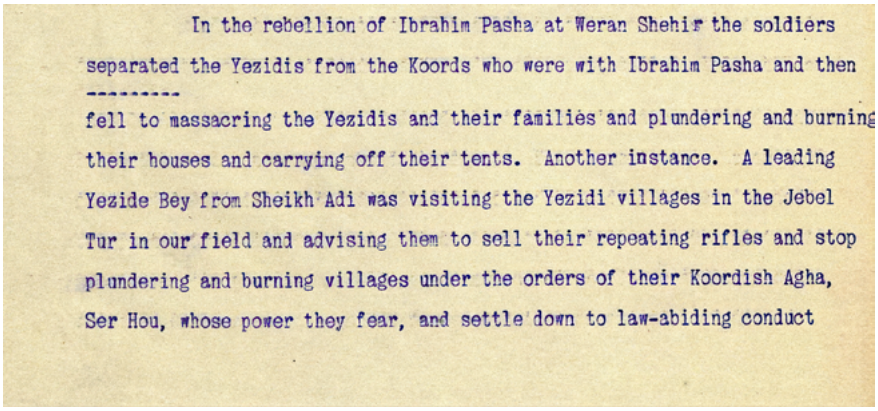
[17] Cf. Muradyan 2013: 126–138.

[18] Cf. Chol 1934: 19ff. and Guest 1993: 168ff.

[19] The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), or Dashnaktsutyun, was founded in 1890 in Tiflis (now Tbilisi). It advocated for Armenian self-determination, engaging in both political and armed struggles against Ottoman and Russian rule. The Dashnak Party played a key role in the First Republic of Armenia (1918–1920) and maintained influence in the Armenian diaspora (Cf. Nalbandian 1963: 151–178. cf. also Libaridian 2004).

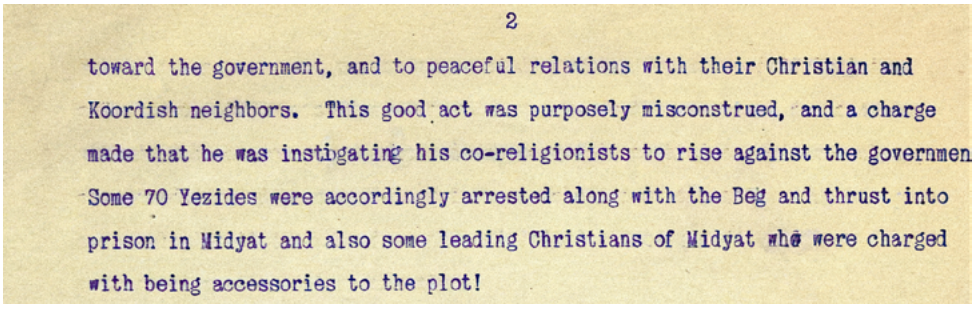
[20] There are several reports about his activities, including some submitted to the Ottoman security authorities, accusing Prince Ismail Chol-beg of communicating with the Armenians to form a Yezidi organisation complicit with the Armenians, and of converting the Yezidis to Christianity (for more details cf. Khatari 2022: 177–187).

[21] Documents pertaining to this incident are preserved in the Ottoman archives under BOA, DH. EUM. THR, No. 5/29 and BOA, DH. EUM. THR, No. 9/21. The event is also discussed in British archival materials, specifically in FO 242/223, 155–156, and FO 242/224, 80.



In the rebellion of Ibrahim Pasha at Weran Shehir the soldiers separated the Yezidis from the Koords who were with Ibrahim Pasha and then
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fell to massacring the Yezidis and their families and plundering and burning their houses and carrying off their tents. Another instance. A leading Yezide Bey from Sheikh Adi was visiting the Yezidi villages in the Jebel Tur in our field and advising them to sell their repeating rifles and stop plundering and burning villages under the orders of their Koordish Agha, Ser Hou, whose power they fear, and settle down to law-abiding conduct

(I)



2

toward the government, and to peaceful relations with their Christian and Koordish neighbors. This good act was purposely misconstrued, and a charge made that he was instigating his co-religionists to rise against the governmen Some 70 Yezides were accordingly arrested along with the Beg and thrust into prison in Midyat and also some leading Christians of Midyat who were charged with being accessories to the plot!

(II)

Figure 1 (I, II): Excerpts from a letter by Alpheus N. Andrus describing the arrest of Ismail Chol-beg. Although the author does not mention him by name, it is clear that he attributes the event to a misunderstanding of Ismail Chol-beg's benevolent intentions.[22]

During his return from the South Caucasus, Ismail Chol-beg made contact with Young Turk nationalists and used the opportunity to petition to regain the Yezidi *sanjaqs*,[23] which had been taken from the Yezidis during a campaign by the governor of Mosul Omar Wahbi Pasha in 1892/3, and to assert himself as the head of the Yezidis. Due

[22] SALT Research Archives, Transfer 145. From A to B. Index No. 66. Al to An. American Board, Office of the Treasurer. 9.08.1897 – 20.03.1911. Signature: ABAITD145AL. Istanbul, fol. 127–128.

[23] The term *sanjaq* (lit. standard) in the Yezidi context refers to a sacred bronze or brass effigy of a bird identified with the Peacock Angel (*Tawûsê Melek*). Traditionally, seven *sanjaqs* are believed to have been entrusted to Sheikh Adi, each linked to one of the seven archangels and associated with specific regions such as Sinjar, Sheikhan, Aleppo, Mardin (Khalta), Van (Zozana), Tabriz, and the Transcaucasus. Their annual ceremonial journeys (*Tawûs-gêran*, "parading of the peacock"), carried out by the Qawwals, remain the central Yezidi ritual, reinforcing spiritual protection, communal unity, and the authority of the Mir, custodian of the *sanjaqs* (cf. Nicolaus 2008: 218–221; *idem* 2024: passim).

to the intervention of Mir Ali Beg, the secular head of the Yezidis, his plan failed, and Ismail Chol-beg returned to Mosul. Thereafter, he went to live in Sinjar.[24]

After the British conquered Mosul in 1918, Ismail Chol-beg established close relations with both the British authorities and with Assyrian nationalists. From 1928 onwards, he was also in contact with representatives of the Kurdish nationalist organisation Khoybun (*Xoybûn*), with whom he had a lively exchange. Even at a young age, Ismail Chol-beg had close contacts with representatives of various nationalist groups. It should be noted here that Ismail Chol-beg was largely considered a "black sheep" both by the Yezidi princely family and the Yezidis in northern Iraq in general. Open to progressive ideas, even if it meant challenging conventions or breaking taboos, he is described by observers as having been extraordinarily ambitious and eager to learn. This is how the Presbyterian missionary Roger Craig Cumberland described him:

The one bright spot on that landscape at present is Ismail Beg. He is a member of the Royal House of the Yezidis (uncle of the chief) and as such he might be expected to be among the conservatives who oppose any change that would curtail the hereditary power of the rulers. On the contrary, he is one of the most forward-looking men in the whole country. Although illiteracy is a tenet of the Yezidi religion, imposed on all except a certain family and the others oppose education and Ismail Chol-beg cannot himself read or write, he is an ardent champion of learning. […] At any rate we are grateful for one man in this benighted race who is looking for something better.[25]

It can therefore be assumed that Ismail Chol-beg had an understanding of the concept of Yezidi identity which (generally speaking) aligned with nationalism, through his many years of contact with various nationalists. This is also evident in his writings.

Before we turn to his own works, let us take a look at the terms he used to describe the Yezidis and the meanings these terms had in the context of the period at hand. In his Arabic-language works, Ismail Chol-begs uses the words *milat*,[26] *qawm* and *ummat*[27] to describe the Yezidis. Although these terms were originally used to refer to a religious

[24] Further details about these journeys and activities are provided in the book review presented in the penultimate section of the article.

[25] Crescent Library. Cf. also Dana and Dunn 2015: 252f.

[26] Ar. *millat* or *al-mulla* means a religious nation, whereas this term in the Yezidi context refers to a nation. Yezidis refer to themselves as *Miletê êzidî* to distinguish them from others and express themselves as a people and a religious community. See for instance the petition of the Yezidi leaders to the Ottomans, "We, the religious nation of the Dasiniyans [Yezidis], cannot, in accordance with our religion, enter the military service. We prefer to give money instead of men, as the Assyrians and Jews do" (Furlani 1940: 61; cf. also Ali 2019a: 44).

[27] In Arabic, several terms and concepts are similar to the English notion of "nation," though their meanings differ and cannot be translated directly. For example, *qawm* and *al-qawmiyya* carry both ethnic and political connotations. *Qawm* generally refers to an ethnic or ethno-national group, while *al-qawmiyya* denotes groups or races, and can be most accurately rendered in English as "ethno-national". The term *al-qawmiyya* is commonly employed by political movements in the Arab world to express ethnic identity. For further discussion on this linguistic distinction cf. Ali 2019a:1.

community, they were used to describe a nation, people and ethnic group, especially from the early 20th century onwards, when nationalism was emerging.[28] The terms *qawm* and *millat* (Kurm. *Qewm û miletê êzidî*) it means and refers to the Yezidi people and nation.[29] in particular should be considered in this context. Both Arab and Kurdish nationalists used these terms for the modern understanding of a nation and to define themselves as a nation and an ethnic group. Moreover, there is written evidence that Western authorities also translated and understood these terms to mean nation.

In the writings of Ismail Chol-beg, the same meaning and usage of these terms is indisputable, not least since he understood that religion and nation were considered separate in the politics of his time.[30] Thus, it is not surprising that his writings in other languages use such terms to convey the concept of nation.

Journey from Sinjar to the South Caucasus: Constructing Yezidi Identity

On December 11, 1908, during his stay in the South Caucasus, Ismail Chol-beg dictated a kind of community constitution[31] at the request of the authorities and of the Yezidis there, which was later described by Western scholars as a catechism. This remarkable document provides a fairly accurate insight into his understanding of Yezidi identity. It is interesting to note that in his dictation he obviously regarded the Yezidis as both a religious community and an ethnic group by today's standards. For him, regarding the Yezidi, religion and ethnicity were inseparable. Thus, he uses the terms "community" and "Yezidi religion" specifically for internal Yezidi affairs, while for general regulations he refers to the Yezidis as a nation, separate from all other nations.[32] In Article 5 of this constitution, for example, he dictates:

> The Yezidis must treat other nations with respect, for all exist according to God's will.[33]

This extraordinary document, which has been a standard source in Yezidi studies for over a hundred years, has only been available in an incomplete version until now. Adolf Dirr, who translated this document into German and published it in 1919, noted that the text contains an oath written in Kurmanji in Russian letters, which he neither translated nor transcribed. However, we found a complete version of this docu-

[28] Cf. Bengio 2002: 89 and Ali 2019a: 1.

[29] This expression is used in Yezidi oral tradition and heritage, and Prince Ismail Chol-beg also used it in his texts.

[30] Cf. LON: R2317/6A/22528/655/Jacket2 (Petition by Ismail Beg, Hamo Sharo and Qolu Hussein dated November 1, 1930, to Capt. Hormuzd Rassam).

[31] Rodziewicz 2025: 38–66.

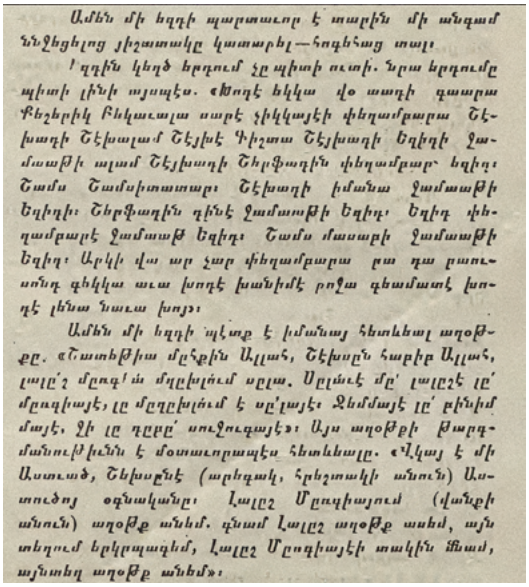
[32] Cf. Dirr 1919: 571–574.

[33] *Ibid*: 571.

ment and can now present it here for the first time, including the previously unpublished section.[34]

> In the aforementioned document, in one section, Ismail Chol-beg sets out a creed and principles of religion for the Yezidis:

A Yezidi should not lie when taking an oath; his oath should be:



Ամեն մի եզդի պարտաւոր է տարին մի անգամ
ՆՆջեցելոց յիշատակը կատարել—հոգեհաց տալ։
Ղզին կեղծ երդում չը պիտի ուտի. Նրա երդումը
պիտի լինի այսպէս. «Ռոժէ եկկա վօ տադի զաարա
Քեշերիկ Բեկաւալա սարէ չիկկայէի փեղամբարա Շէ-
խադի Շէխալամ Շէյխէ Դիշտա Շէյխադի եզիդի Ջա-
մաաթի ալամ Շէյխադի Հիլքադին փեղամբար եզիդ։
Շամա Շամսիտատար։ Շէխադի իմանա ջամաաթի
եզիդի։ Շերֆադին դինէ ջամաաթի եզիդ։ եզիդ փե-
ղամբարէ ջամաաթ եզիդ։ Շամա մասաբի ջամաաթի
եզիդ։ Արկի վա ար չար փեղամբարա բա դա բաու-
սոնդ գեկկա աւա խոդէ խանիմէ բոլա գեամատ խո-
դէ լենա նաւա խոյ։

Ամեն մի եզդի պէտք է իմանայ հետեւեալ աղօթ-
քը. «Շատեթիա մըհքին Ալլահ, Շէխըն հաբիբ Ալլահ,
լալըշ մըռգիա մըղխլում սըլա. Սըլուէ մը լալըշէ լը
մըռգիայէ, լը մըղխլում է սը լայէ։ Զամմայէ լը բինիմ
մայէ, ջի լը ղըրը սուջուգայէ։ Այս աղօթքի թարգ-
մանութիւնն է մօտաւորապէս հետեւեալը. «Միակ է մի
Աստուած, Շէխընէ (արեգակ, հրեշտակի անուն) Ա-
տուծոյ օգնականը։ Լալըշ Մըռգիայում (վանքի
անուն) աղօթք անեմ. գնամ Լալըշ աղօթք ասեմ, այն
տեղում երկրպագեմ, Լալըշ Մըռգիայէն տակին ձեամ,
այնտեղ աղօթք անեմ»։

Figure 2: The section from Ismail Beg's document that has not been considered in research so far and was considered lost.[35]

Transliteration of the text from the Armenian alphabet into the Kurmanji Latin alphabet, and translation into English:

Xwedê yeke, bê şirîkî bê hevale,	God is One [= the only one], without partner and without companion.
Sere çîkayê pêxembera	He is the head of the prophets.
Şîxadî şêx al-a'm,	Sheikhadi is the Sheikh of all.
Şêxê gişta Şîxadî,	The Sheikh of all is Sheikhadi.

[34] The complete document authored by Ismail Chol-beg was published in an Armenian journal (cf. Kanayants 1913: Vol. IV, 68–71).

[35] Cf. *ibid*.

Êzîdî cime'tî a'lem Şîxadî Şerfedîn	The entire Yezidi community [belongs to] Sheikhadi [and] Sharfadin.[36]
Pêxember Êzîd.	The Prophet is Yezid.
Şems Şemsî Teter.	Shams is Shams Tatar.
Şîxadî îmana cime'tî êzdî.	Sheikh Adi is the ***Iman***[37] of the Yezidi community.
Şerfedîn dînê cime'tî êzdî.	Sharfedin is the Religion[38] of the Yezidi community.
Êzîd pêxemberê cime'tî êzdî.	Yezid is the Prophet of the Yezidi community.
Şems mesebê cime'tî êzdî.	Shams is the ***Meseb***[39] of the Yezidi community.

In another part of the document, Ismail Chol-beg urges every Yezidi to learn and know this prayer:

Şedetya [Şehdeya] min heq Ela.	My testimony is to the truth of God.
Şîxisin hebîb Ela.	Sheikhsin is God's beloved.
Laliş Mergeh mex'lêm [Meqlub] sela Silavê me Lalişê, li Mergehê, li Mex'lûmê [Meqlubê] selayê.	Lalish, Mergeh, and Maqlub are sacred places of worship and prayer.
Cêmayê, li binîmayê, cîyê lê dibe sicûdeyê.[40]	We offer our worship at Lalish, Mergeh, and Maqlub, the places of prayer, with the congregation gathered, in the place where prostration is performed.

It is worth mentioning that, according to his own statement, Ismail Chol-beg's commitment led the Russian authorities to classify the Yezidis and Kurds as separate nations. At the beginning of 1909, Ismail Chol-beg visited the Governor General of the Caucasus, Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov,[41] whom he referred to as *al-Malik-Namez[t] nik*, or "King-Namestnik/Viceroy",[42] at his residence. Ismail Chol-beg reported how he

[36] According to Yezidi tradition, Sharfadin was also a name of Sheikh Adi. Therefore, it is unclear whether the text refers to Sheikh Adi and Sharfadin separately, or to Sheikh Adi-Sharfadin as a single figure.

[37] In Yezidi religion, the word iman denotes the personal and sincerely arising faith of an individual, the genuineness of which is known only to God and to the believer himself (cf. Pirbari and Shchedrovitsky 2016: 249 and Rodziewicz 2017: 380.

[38] In Yezidi religion, dîn (religion) denotes the external dimension of faith (festivals, rituals, customs, fasting, circumcision, pilgrimage, and religious order, etc.). Sharfadin is regarded by the Yezidis as the personification of this aspect and as the very name of their Din (cf. Pirbari and Shchedrovitsky 2016: 249 and Rodziewicz 2017: 38–39.

[39] Spiritual path (Ar. *tariqat*).

[40] Kanayants 1913: Vol. IV, 68–71.

[41] For Count Illarion Ivanovich Vorontsov-Dashkov (26.02.1905–23.08.1915) cf. http://regiment.ru/bio/V/30.htm (accessed: 14.09.2025).

[42] Rodziewicz 2026: in print.

complained that the authorities were treating the Yezidis as Kurds. He then quoted Vorontsov-Dashkov as follows:

> We knew that there was a Yezidi people, [but] we knew nothing about them. We only knew that these people were like the Kurds. And now we know that the Yezidi people are different from the Kurds and from Islam.[43]



Figure 3: Ismail Chol-beg with Yezidis during his stay in Tiflis.[44]

It is important to note that it was during this trip that Ismail Chol-beg came into contact with the Armenian nationalist party Dashnak, which may have been his earliest exposure to the idea of nationalism. He made contact with a member of the Dashnak Committee and the Armenian Patriarch. There are reports that Ismail Chol-beg felt deeply connected to the Armenians and appealed for a Yezidi-Armenian alliance – a plan that was misunderstood by the government and led to his brief imprisonment, from which he was subsequently released.

On March 20, 1909, Ismail Chol-beg presented a petition to the Ottoman Grand Vizier, requesting that the Yezidis be recognised by the state as a community with their own national and religious characteristics. The exact wording of his petition is still unknown, but interestingly, a French-language Istanbul newspaper reported on it and summarised the content of the petition as follows:

Mir Ismail presented a petition to the Grand Vizier on Saturday, asking that the Yezidis be recognised by the state as a community with their national and religious characteristics, that he be granted a subsidy as the heir to the chief of a powerful tribe in the empire, and that he be admitted to a school for education.[45]

[43] Chol 1934: 24.

[44] Kanayants 1913: Vol. I, 18.

[45] The content of the petition was explained in *La Turquie*, a French-language newspaper based in Istanbul, under the title Une nouvelle communauté. It is unknown who the author of the newspaper article was (cf. Une nouvelle

This account makes clear that Ismail Chol-beg was steadfast in his principles and played a pivotal role in demanding recognition of the Yezidis as a distinct religious community. Equally significant was his insistence on the importance of education, reflecting his awareness that widespread illiteracy among his people would hinder their progress.

On the other hand, in a related context concerning national specificity and Yezidi identity, an unusual and remarkable event occurred in 1919 in the history of the Yezidis. In Georgia, shortly after the country's independence,[46] the Yezidis founded the first officially state-recognised Yezidi organisation. The organisation was founded on the advice of Ismail Chol-beg and the constituent general assembly in July 1919 was convened in his name. The name of the organisation was "National Council of Yezidis" and was approved by the Georgian government.[47] It is known that Ismail Chol-beg also corresponded with the Yezidis in the South Caucasus at this very time ten years after his visit.[48] The aim of the organisation was explained in a document:

> A general assembly of the Yezidis was held in the community shelter in Ortachala to discuss their fate and to organise a special national council to liaise with the Armenian National Council in order to develop mutual peaceful activities for the common good.[49]

In the same year, Ismail Chol-beg sent several letters written in Armenian to the Yezidis in Armenia, signed by several Yezidi leaders. He informed them about the Yezidis' struggles in Sinjar against the Ottomans, their situation and their role in rescuing the Armenians. He said: "they [the Turks] have destroyed our nation". He went on to tell the Armenians about the rescue of a large number of Armenians, adding: "The Armenians spoke words of praise about the Yezidi nation".[50]

Letters to the Yezidis in the South Caucasus: "To My Nation and Children"

Between 1917 and 1919, Ismail Chol-beg had three letters written in the Armenian language, which he addressed to the Yezidis in the South Caucasus. The longest of these

communauté 1909: 1).

46 Historically situated on trade routes, Georgia was among the earliest Christian states (4th century) and later came under Persian, Ottoman, and Russian influence. After incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1921, it regained independence in 1991.

47 For a detailed description of the National Council of the Yezidis as well as archive documents about this organisation cf. Pirbari 2012: 4.

48 In 1919, Ismail Chol-beg sent a very long letter written in Armenian to the Yezidis in the Caucasus, cf. MAT Ord. 240-f-003.

49 Cf. Pirbari 2012: 4.

50 MAT Ord. 240–f–003.

letters contains a detailed description of the situation of the Yezidis in Sinjar at the time.[51]

Ismail Chol-beg's activities in the Transcaucasia were regarded by later authors as the activism of a Kurdish personality, and his relationship with Armenians was described as an "Armenian-Kurdish relationship".[52] The fact is, however, that Ismail Chol-beg did not mention the Kurds at all in this long letter.

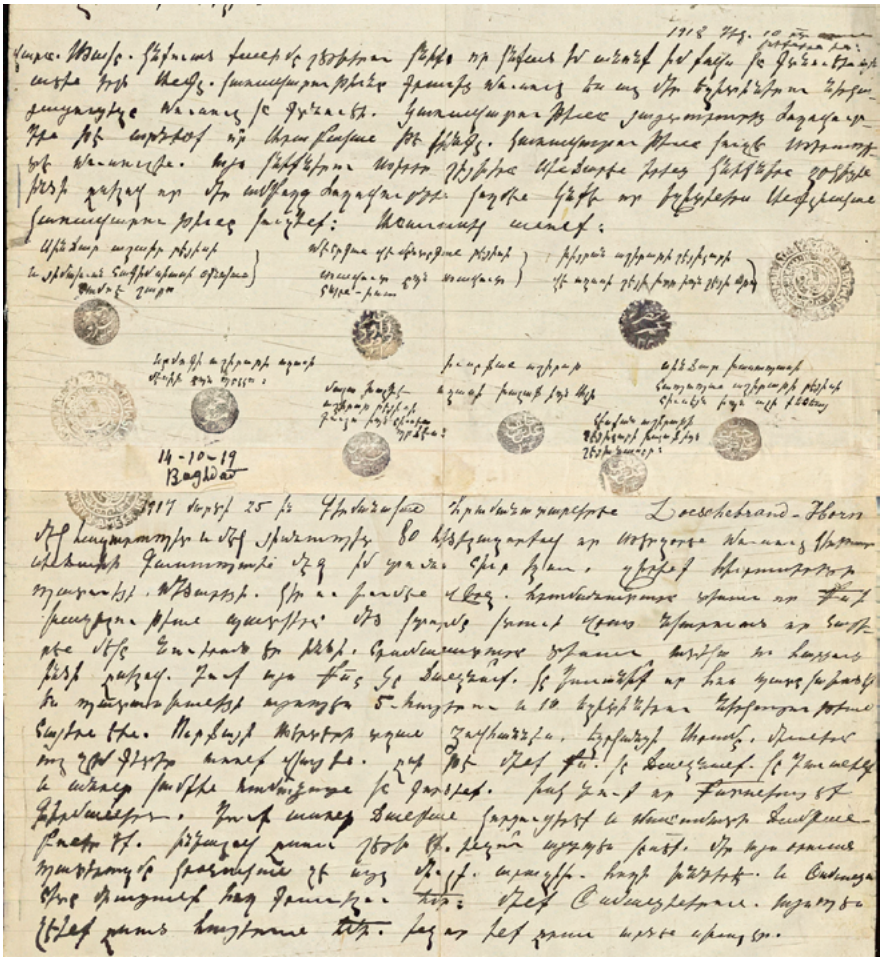


Figure 4: An excerpt from one of Ismail Chol-beg's letters, bearing the seals of various leaders.[53]

[51] All of his letters were sent as one long, rolled-up document. All quotations and references from the letters are taken from MAT Ord. 240–f–003. For the purposes of our research, we shall limit out discussion here to how he describes the Yezidis.

[52] Cf. Chachani 1975: 226–247.

[53] Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (MAT): MAT Ord. 240–f–003 (Ismail Beg's letters to the Yezidis in the Caucasus).

One of his letters sees Ismail Chol-beg referring to himself as "Sheikh Ismail Chol-beg of the Yezidi Nation". Two of his seals can also be seen on the letters several times. One of the seals reads in Arabic and in Latin script:

"Ameer Ismael, Rais Mulat al-Yezidia"

meaning "Emir Ismail, Chief of the Yezidi Nation" Another seal, which he also used on other documents, reads:

Emir Sheikh Ismail Beg, Chief of the Yezidis.

In the context of the historical persecution of the Yezidis, he specifically names two individuals, a Turkish emir named Dawud Pasha and the Kurdish emir of Rawanduz, Mohammed Pasha, whom he refers to in his letter as Kor Pasha (Mîrê Kore),[54] as the beginning of the decline of the Yezidis. In Ismail Chol-beg's words: "From that day on, our people were exterminated". In another letter, addressed to the Yezidi leaders, Ismail Chol-beg interestingly refers to "the Yezidi language" and writes about his efforts to promote education among the Yezidis:



Figure 5: One of Ismail Chol-beg's seals stamped on his letters.[55]

> We must ensure our development; we have endured enough, we have suffered enough through ignorance, and at least the peoples of the world should not revile us by saying that there are a people called the Yezidis who consider reading to be a sin – that is a disgrace for us.[56]

[54] The names mentioned here played a major role in the genocidal campaigns against the Yezidis, one being a Turkish commander and the other a Kurdish emir of one Kurdish princedom. For further details cf. Ali 2019b.

[55] *Ibid*.

[56] MAT Ord. 240–f–003 (Ismail Beg's letters to the Yezidis in the Caucasus).

Later Yezidi authors, especially in the Soviet Union, who identified with the Kurds and were close to Kurdish nationalism, attempted to portray Ismail Chol-beg's activities under the banner of Armenian-Kurdish relations, thereby making particular reference to his activities among the Transcaucasia Yezidis and to these letters. However, Ismail Chol-beg did not mention Kurds or Kurdish personalities, except for Mohammed Pasha of Rawanduz, to whom he referred in a negative context. In his letters, Ismail consistently portrays the Yezidis as an isolated but independent nation with its own tragic history, its own political life, its own language and its own leaders. This claim is clearly supported by the text of the messages, a copy of which is in our possession.

Under the British Mandate in Iraq: Leadership, Negotiating Authority, and Identity

After the British conquered Mosul in 1918, they demanded that the minorities issue a declaration of independence. The Yezidis in Sinjar promptly drafted one, signed by over 50 people. The signatories were the most influential people in Sinjar, including Ismail Chol-beg. The latter signed as the secular leader of the Yezidis. In it, the Yezidi leaders declared that they wanted to live under British rule and would not allow "an Arab government to rule over us" and further stated:

> This is why we have written and signed this document in the name of the whole Yezidi nation in the Vilayets of Diyarbakir and Mosul.[57]

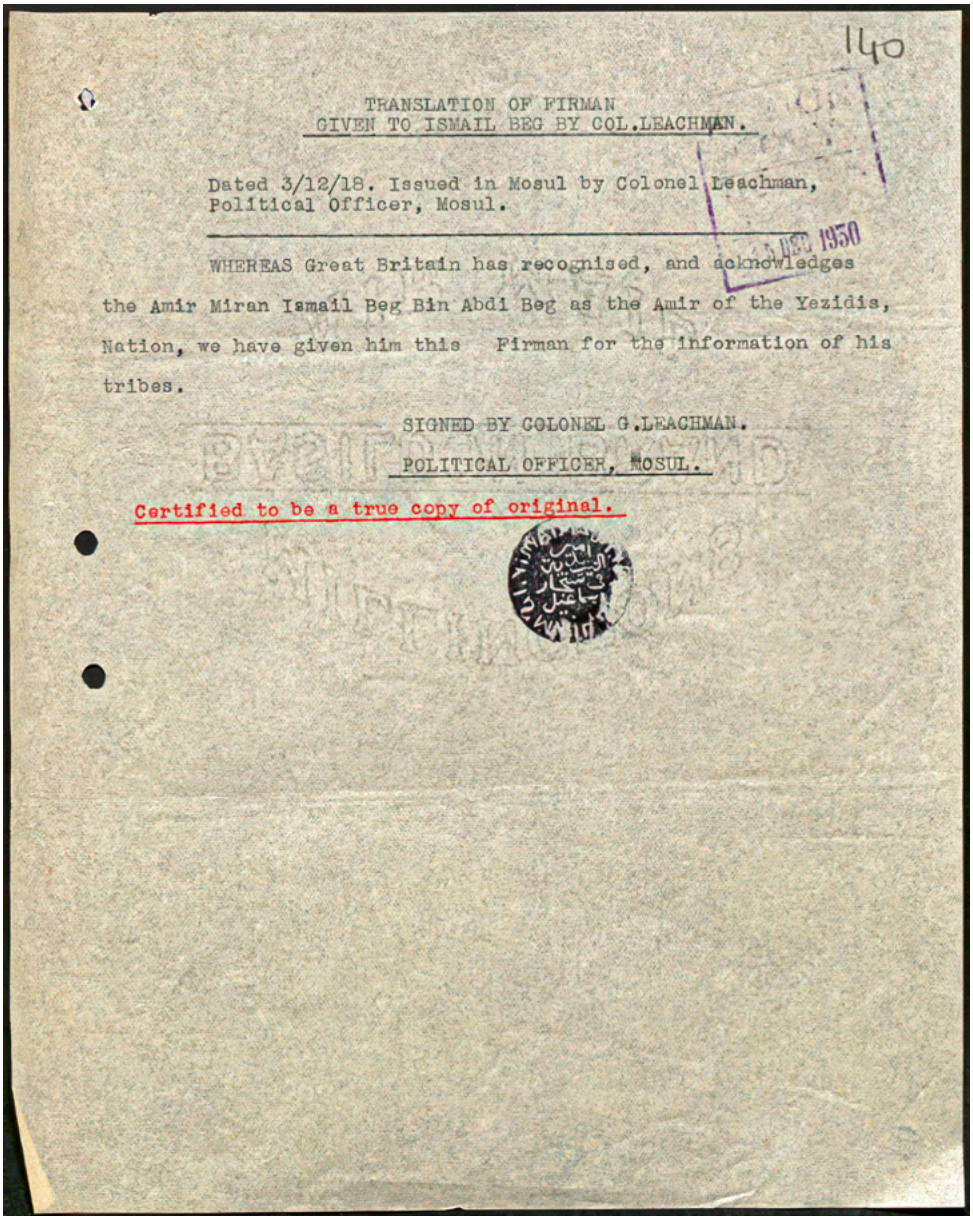
At the end of 1918, the British authorities in Mosul issued a decree officially recognising Ismail Chol-beg as the Emir of the Yezidis:

> WHEREAS Great Britain has recognised, and acknowledges the Amir Miran[58] Ismail Beg bin Abdi as the Amir of the Yezidis Nation, we have given him this Firman [Decree] for the information of his tribes.[59]

[57] IOR/L/PS/10/755 (full Arabic self-declaration). The English translation of the quote comes from the British authority, cf. IOR/L/PS/10/756.

[58] Kurm. *Mîrê Mîran*, Eng. The Prince of Princes.

[59] LON: R2317/6A/22528/655/Jacket2 (Company of Col. G. Leachman dated 03.12. 1918) under the title Translation of the *firman* given to Ismail Beg by Col. Leachman.



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TRANSLATION OF FIRMAN
GIVEN TO ISMAIL BEG BY COL.LEACHMAN.

Dated 3/12/18. Issued in Mosul by Colonel Leachman, Political Officer, Mosul.

DEC 1950

WHEREAS Great Britain has recognised, and acknowledges the Amir Miran Ismail Beg Bin Abdi Beg as the Amir of the Yezidis, Nation, we have given him this Firman for the information of his tribes.

SIGNED BY COLONEL G.LEACHMAN.
POLITICAL OFFICER, MOSUL.

Certified to be a true copy of original.

(I)



(II)

Figure 6 (I, II): Translation of a firman given to Ismail Beg by Col. Leachman, bearing also Ismail Chol-beg's Arabic seal dating from 1918.[60]

In the context of Ismail Chol-beg's activities, movements, and interactions with neighbouring nationalities, it is noteworthy that he demonstrated a particular affinity for the idea of the Yezidis' Assyrian origin. He most likely developed this idea through his long-standing collaboration with Assyrian nationalists, as both they and Ismail Chol-beg asserted descent from the ancient Assyrians. From the 1920s onward, he, together with influential Yezidi leaders from Sinjar under the leadership of the head of the Faqîr tribe,[61] Hamo Sharo,[62] supported the efforts of the Assyrian commander Agha

[60] LON: R2317/6A/22528/655/Jacket2 (Company of Col. G. Leachman dated 03.12.1918) under the title Translation of a firman given to Ismail Beg by Col. Leachman.

[61] The Faqîrs (lit: poors) of Sinjar, are an ascetic Yezidi caste distinguished by their black attire and woollen belts, served as shrine guardians, ritual specialists, and moral exemplars. Beyond their spiritual functions, they frequently mediated disputes and provided leadership during crises. Among the most influential Faqîr lineages was the Hamo Sharo family, which gained prominence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Hamo Sharo emerged as a central leader of the Sinjari Yezidis, combining religious authority with political influence.

[62] Hamo Sharo is considered one of the most important Yezidi leaders in the history of Sinjar. He was born in 1850 in Zivki village in the middle of Mount Sinjar. He played a pivotal role in defending Sinjar from external threats, negotiating with both the British Mandate and subsequent Iraqi authorities, and preserving Yezidi communal autonomy, securing his family's standing as spiritual and temporal leaders in the region. He died in 1933. For more details on Hamo Sharo cf. Shingali 2000: 113 and Ali 2019a: 65, 90–91.

Petros[63] to establish an Assyrian state or achieve autonomy in the Assyrian and Yezidi regions of Mosul. Consistently, he maintained that the Yezidis were of Assyrian origin. In Ismail Chol-beg's own words, recorded by a traveller who met him in 1927, he described this idea as follows:

> From him I learnt that the Yezidis are of pure Assyrian stock, and directly descended from the great conquering race that built the palaces of Nineveh. Their faith, however, was of Semitic origin, and was brought to the Assyrians in the days of Nebi Daud [the prophet David].[64]

As a representative of an "Assyro-Chaldean" delegation and a Yezidi delegation, Ismail Chol-beg presented the British authorities with several petitions and a draft of an Assyrian state. The project failed, but Hormuzd Rassam[65] continued with this venture. It is astonishing that in a 1930 letter to the British, Ismail Chol-beg and Hamo Sharo explicitly emphasised that Homurzd Rassam was their official representative and spokesman. Hamo Sharo, who worked closely with Ismail Chol-beg, requested that Agha Petros fulfil his plan to establish non-Islamic autonomy as quickly as possible.[66]

Attention should also be paid to Ismail Chol-beg self-identification. Interestingly, in an undated and handwritten English language letter with the seal of Ismail Chol-beg to Gertrude Bell, he signed the letter: "Sheikh Ismail, Chief the Yezide Nation".[67] On his visit card and seal he also signed as "Ismail Chol-beg, Prince of the Yezidi Nation".[68] The decree issued by the British also has his Arabic-language seal with the inscription "Leader of the Yezidi Nation".[69] One of his earlier seals from 1918 reads:

> Ameer Shaikh Ismail, Rais Mulat al-Yezidiah.[70]

[63] Aga Petros Iliya (1880–1932) was born in the Hakari region in southern Turkey and was a member of the Chaldean Church. He worked in the Ottoman consulate of Urmia and became consul in 1909. From 1919 to 1923 he worked ceaselessly for the Christian cause, before being exiled by the British authorities to France at the end of World War I (cf. Baumer 2006: 261 and Ali 2019a: 75–77).

[64] Frewen 1927: 9.

[65] He was a British citizen and an Anglicized Mosul Chaldean whose grandfather had served as an assistant to the archaeologist Henry Layard during his expeditions in northern Iraq in the 1840s. During the British Mandate, he and the Assyrian military leader Agha Petrus actively promoted the creation of an Assyrian Christian enclave or "free state" in the Mosul province, intended to include the region's indigenous Christian and Yezidi populations. Both minorities, Christians and Yezidis, the latter being the second-largest non-Muslim community in the province were targeted by Assyrian propaganda; however, among the Yezidis, only the leaders of Sinjar appear to have aligned themselves with the Assyrian cause (cf. Fuccaro 1999: chapter 2 and 5.

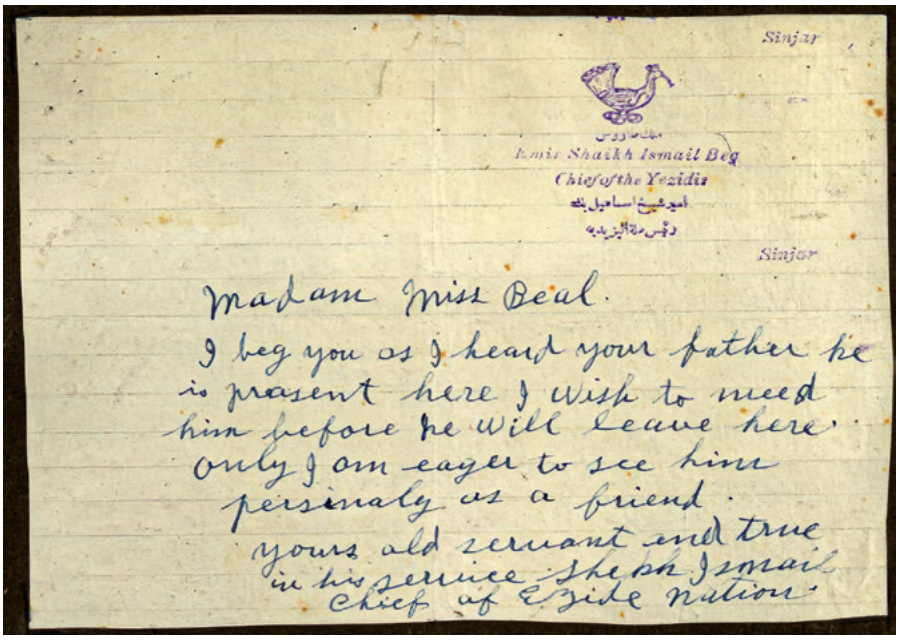
[66] Cf. *Ibid*: 163.

[67] Newcastle University, Gertrude Bell Archive, Misc/10/7 (undated letter from Ismail Beg to Gertrude Bell).

[68] NAMTSTC: 1983–12–693 (visiting card from Ismail Beg).

[69] LON: R2317/6A/22528/655/Jacket2 (Company of Col. G. Leachman dated 03.12.1918).

[70] MAT Ord. 240–f–003.



(I)



(II)

Figure 7 (I, II) A document referring to the Yezidis as a nation, including a seal of Ismail Chol Beg, which he had been using since at least 1918.[71]

[71] Newcastle University, Gertrude Bell Archive, Misc/10/7 (undated letter from Ismail Beg to Gertrude Bell).

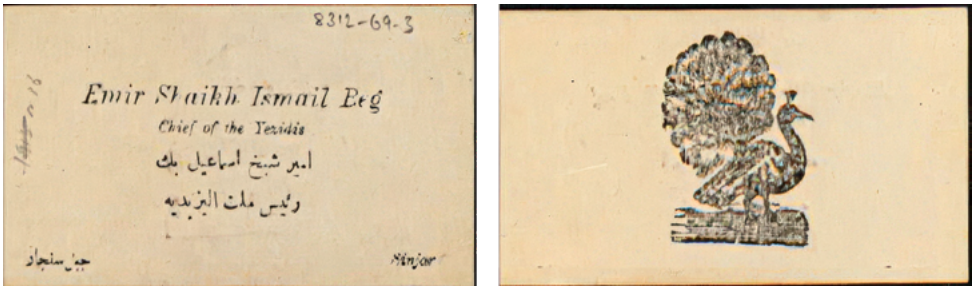


Figure 8: Ismail Chol-beg's visiting card from 1916.[72]

One of the last extensive records of Ismail Chol-beg's views on the origins of the Yezidis can be found in a German travel report by Paul Schütz. He recorded the following from a conversation with Ismail Chol-beg:

> I am carefully recording here what Ismail Bey [Beg] told us. His religion is 4000 years old. The Yezidis are the true descendants of the ancient Assyrians. Their religion in its oldest form is Astai [Azday]. The stars, the sun and the moon are still worshiped today. Their faith had its heyday in the time before Mohammed. Sidon, Tyre, Damascus were the main centres. 'We were the most warlike people in the world and built the first ships. We conquered large parts of Persia, Arabia, Hittitia and parts of the Roman Empire'. Their bitterest enemy to date arose in Islam. Many believers then became apostates. Yezidi rule collapsed. It rose again fifty years later under Ben Omaja [Umayyads]. However, during the violent conversion soon afterwards, the empire finally collapsed.[73]

The account of the German traveller Leo Matthias, who presumably met Ismail Chol-beg in the late 1920s, provides another comprehensive insight into Ismail's understanding of the Yezidi identity and illustrates its complexity at a time when ethnology had no definition or terms for an ethnic group like the Yezidis:

> And there was something else to mention, something very important, even a surprise, that came out of the conversation with Said Beg's uncle […]. You can't become Yezidi, just like you can't become Chinese. So, one should actually say: they are a race, because the decisive factor for belonging to Yezidism is not some physical characteristic, but faith. So perhaps the Yezidis are best described as a people. However, this also leads to misunderstandings, because among the Yezidis there is no difference between the community of God and the community of the people. There are no members of this people who pray to other gods. Since there is no term in any European language for what is more than a race, a religious community or a people, and yet is one in itself, the Yezidis are indeed a humanity apart.[74]

[72] NAMTSTC: 1983–12–693.

[73] Schütz 1930: 138.

[74] Matthias 1931: 107–109.

What Matthias finds difficult to describe here is today's ethnological assessment of the Yezidis as an ethnoreligious group.

On the other hand, Ismail Chol-beg tireless fight against his sister and nephew for the *sanjaqs* income[75] gave him an opportunistic character. Weakened by this power struggle, to which he was subject, he approached Kurdish and Assyrian nationalists in order to use their support to assert himself against Said Beg and the Arab government and to largely maintain the independence of the Yezidis.

His rather detailed autobiography offers further insights into his understanding of Yezidi identity that are consistent with the other sources. Despite his rejection of an Arab state and his generally hostile attitude towards Arab nationalists, he described himself as a direct descendant of the Umayyads from the house of Yazid I and Sheikh Adi.[76] The second section of his work, which deals with the Yezidi religion, illustrates the nature of his relationship with Kurds. While he adopted many statements about the teachings and origins of the Yezidis from the works of Western researchers and made them his own, he seems to consciously evaluate most of them, while rejecting the work of those who erroneously referred to the Yezidis as Arabs or Kurds.

Dialogue with Kurdish Nationalism: Allies or Rivals Between Religion and Nation

Another aspect that deserves special attention is connection of Ismail Chol-beg with the Kurdish nationalist organisation Khoybun, not least because his activities for Khoybun have led to his being viewed as a Kurdish nationalist. Although his Kurdish affiliation is mentioned in some correspondence, neither he nor other Yezidi figures provided financial or military support to this organisation. It is astonishing that such a reference to Kurds appear only in the correspondence with and through Khoybun, an aspect that contradicts all other available accounts and reports. The report of an important founding member also confirms this fact. In July 1926, Sheikh Mahdi visited the Yezidis in Sinjar. He was the brother of Sheikh Said Pîran, who led the Kurdish uprising named after him a year earlier. His main goal was to find support among the Kurdish tribes for the planned establishment of the organisation. In a short letter, he addresses the relationship of the Yezidis and Ismail Chol-beg with Kurds:

[75] The income of the *sanjaq* refers to the religious donations and alms offered by Yezidis during the ceremonial visits of the Sanjaq of the Peacock (*Tawûs-gêran*, "parading of the peacock") to Yezidi regions. In accordance with long-standing religious customs, the Qawwals accompany the Sanjaqs, and Yezidis present and offer vows and alms as part of these rituals. The collected income is subsequently transferred to the Lalish treasury, which operates under the authority of the Yezidi Prince. Cf. Nicolaus 2024: 84, 87f.

[76] Cf. Chol 1934: 13.

> I spent two nights as a guest of Ismail Beg and then went to Khudeda, Hamo Sharo and the *Müdür* [village chiefs]; *Müdür* was very kind to me and sent me to Sheikh Khalaf […]. I did not observe any [Kurdish] national consciousness among the Yezidis. Don't trust Ismail Beg.[77]

It is known that at the time of *Khoybun*'s activity, the brothers Celadet Bedirkhan Beg and Kamiran Bedirkhan Beg propagated a kinship with the Yezidi princely family and nationalistically reinterpreted and falsified the recitation of a Yezidi sacred text by Ismail Chol-beg by replacing the term Yezidkhan[78] (Kurm.: *Êzidxan* or *Êzdîxan*) with Kurdistan.[79] In his short publication, Jeladet Bedirkhan corrupted a verse from a well-known Yezidi *Qewl* (religious hymn) by replacing the word Yezidkhan with Kurdistan, although it is known that the term Kurdistan does not appear in the Yezidi *Qewls*.[80] With this change, Bedirkhan intended to give the Yezidis a Kurdish nationalist touch. Furthermore, he authored and added two verses that are very hostile to Turks and Arabs which do not belong to the authentic version.

When Ismail Chol-beg visited Yezidis in Syria in 1928, Kamiran Bedirkhan used this opportunity to win Ismail Chol-beg 's support for *Khoybun* and to usurp him to influence the Yezidis in its favour.[81] One conceivable explanation why he joined *Khoybun*, despite his different interests, could have been the increasingly violent power struggle between him and his nephew Said Beg. With the support of the influential organisation, he may have aspired to strengthen his position and advance his political interests in this power struggle.

In a document that was part of *Khoybun*'s correspondence with the British authorities, he describes himself as a Kurd.[82] A statement that contradicts all other sources and which he himself later did not confirm to the authorities.

In this context, attention must be drawn to another letter from Ismail Chol-beg, in which he makes a similar reference to Kurds as in his correspondence with *Khoybun*, the authenticity of which is questionable. This document is an undated letter in Arabic to Bayard Dodge, President of the American University of Beirut (AUB), which is kept

[77] FO 371/11471 (Mahdi's letter of 19/06/1926 to Muhammed Amin Effendi), quoted by Yeğen 2012: 220f.).

[78] Yezidkhan is historically a toponym for various Yezidi settlement areas and is today primarily referred to by Yezidi nationalists as the name of their traditional homelands.

[79] Cf. Bedirkhan 1933: 8.

[80] This issue has become the subject of controversy in recent years in Kurdish and Yezidi media as well as on social platforms. There are a few Yezidi clergy who actually mention the term Kurdistan here. However, most use only the term Yezidkhan, and many Yezidis consider the use of the term Kurdistan in Yezidi sacred texts to be a falsification. This is supported by the fact that, unlike Yezidkhan, Kurdistan is not mentioned in any (other) sacred texts, and the Yezidis have no historical or religious concept for the term Kurdistan.

[81] LON: COL101bis/80/4 (Reference Second British Memorandum paragraphs 25–28 and sketch map enclosed with Note No. 18 dated 22.04.1938).

[82] AIR 23/416, ref. I/M/42/B (Ismail Beg's letter dated 17.02.1930).

in the AUB archives. The entire document appears to be handwritten (what is noteworthy, since Ismail Chol-beg was illiterate), and although Ismail Chol-beg is listed as the sender at the end of the letter, his seal or stamp is missing, which is unusual, as he marked all his letters with his seal. Furthermore, the letter makes no reference to the Yezidis. Although the entire letter is a kind of thank-you letter to Dodge for his commitment to the Kurds, it ends with an atypical reference to the Kurds:

> I reiterate my plea for any assistance you can provide to my Kurdish nation in these challenging times.[83]

There is therefore every indication that Ismail Chol-beg's dealings with *Khoybun* and the Bedirkhan brothers were of a pragmatic nature. He seemed to understand what the Bedirkhans wanted to hear and acted accordingly, which showed that he understood the nationalist ideas of the Kurds. The brothers' reaction to the publication of Ismail Chol-beg's book was probably shocking.[84] Karl Hadank, who worked on a project with Kamiran Bedirkhan in 1936, noted:

> According to Prince Dr. Kāmurān, this book wrongly bears the name of Ismāʾīl Beg Čol; it does not come from him; this Ēzādī cleric only understood Arabic imperfectly. Another disadvantage of the book is that it was not written in Kurdish, but in Arabic.[85]

Ismail Chol-beg appeared to conceal his true views from the Bedirkhans and in correspondence with and through *Khoybun*. The reason for this was probably, as already mentioned, the support that he secured with such a relationship against Said Beg and the establishment of his role as Emir of the Yezidis. It is therefore not surprising that *Khoybun*'s attempt to gain a foothold among the Yezidis through Ismail Chol-beg failed. It can be seen as a kind of final act of desperation when the organisation falsely propagated that, among others, the secular head of the Yezidis in Sheikhan, Said Beg, and influential leaders in Sinjar had become members of *Khoybun*, a statement that was not true.[86]

Ismail Chol-beg never made such a reference to Kurds outside of his correspondence with *Khoybun*. His understanding was much more that the Kurds were descended partly from Yezidis and partly from Assyrians as a result of Islamization.

[83] AUB: Collection of scattered papers consisting of letters (Arabic), No. 57: Letter from the Emir of the Yezidis to President Dudge (Arabic).

[84] Here, they are referring to Ismail Chol-beg's text (Chol 1934).

[85] Hadank 1938: 40f.

[86] AIR 23/418/IM/1/33. The attempt to win Said Beg for the organisation had already failed years before (cf. Fuccaro 1999: 131).

When the Boundary Commission of the League of Nations questioned Ismail Chol-beg in May 1932, two years after the aforementioned document, about the relationship of the Yezidis with their neighbours, he gave the following answer:

> Now we have very good relations with Christians and Muslims. During the war we saved the Christians. We have very good relations with the Kurds, who are from the same family as us. The Turks oppressed them a lot and they converted.[87]

Here, too, it can be seen that Ismail Chol-beg admitted a relationship with Kurds, but differentiated the Yezidis and Kurds as two different nations. He neither saw the Yezidis as Kurds nor himself as a representative of a Kurdish group. A traveller who visited Ismail Chol-beg and described his house noticed various devotional objects, portraits and pictures of, for example, Ottoman sultans and European rulers, but nothing that referred to the Kurdish movements or Kurds.[88]

In 1932, Kamiran Bedirkhan wrote a petition, which he tried to hand over to the British through Ismail Chol-beg purportedly in the name of the Yezidis. In this petition, Kamiran Bedirkhan spoke of the Yezidis only as Kurds. Furthermore, he included the incorporation of Sinjar into the French Mandate in Syria, where *Khoybun* was particularly active. However, neither Ismail Chol-beg nor any other Yezidi leader signed this petition. In addition, a British official added:

> The Yezidis have always been conscious of themselves as a religious minority but have never hitherto shown any signs of pan-Kurdish sentiments.[89]

It is evident from Ismail Chol-beg's contacts with activists and leaders of nationalist movements, that he was able to draw upon their orientations and activities to his advantage while pursuing his own specific objectives, irrespective of whether they were Assyrian or Christian leaders, or Kurdish nationalists. This is most evident in his relations with *Khoybun*. His approach may be described as overtly pragmatic, further reinforcing the article's argument regarding the Yezidis, as well as Ismail Chol-beg's orientations and his understanding of identity and nationalism.

[87] LON: COL102/81/3 (Witness No. 9 – Supplement "D": Ismail Beg, 02.05.1932).

[88] Cf. Kellner 1918: 4.

[89] COL101bis/80/4 (Reference Second British Memorandum paragraphs 25–28 and sketch map enclosed with Note No. 18 dated 22.04.1932).

Ismail Chol-beg's Own Words: Reflections on His Legacy, Thought, and Its Historical Significance

Given the importance of the topic and its close connection to the argument of this article, we consider it appropriate to provide a general review herein of Ismail Beg Chol's text entitled: *Al-Yezidiyah Qadiman wa Hadithan* (The Yezidis, Past and Present), published in 1934 as part of the American University of Beirut's Oriental Series, under the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and edited by Costi K. Zurayk (Constantin Zureiq). This pioneering 134-page work is a foundational contribution to the study of the Yezidi religious minority.

The content and structure of Chol's work is notable for its compilation of three primary texts that offer an in-depth glimpse into the religious beliefs, customs, doctrines, and practices of the Yezidis.[90] These texts provide firsthand insights into the community's spiritual life, rituals, and societal norms. The third part provides a historical account of Mount Sinjar and of notable milestones in Yezidi history.[91] In the latter, Chol highlights the historical resilience of the Yezidi community by documenting their persecution under Ottoman rule along with various survival strategies which they developed and applied in response to such adversity. He provides detailed accounts of the massacres and forced displacements that occurred during the 19th and early 20th centuries – particularly those linked to Ottoman military campaigns – shedding light on the enduring struggle and adaptive responses of the Yezidis in the face of repeated violence and ongoing systematic persecution. The addition of an autobiography from a Yezidi leader offers a uniquely personal perspective, shedding light on the lived experiences and challenges faced by the Yezidis during that era,[92] alongside an editorial introduction written by the editor.

From a scholarly and scientific standpoint, *The Yezidis, Past and Present* holds significant value, particularly given the scarcity of academic resources on the Yezidis at the time of its publication.[93] As a rare primary source authored by a Yezidi leader, it documents Ismail Chol-beg's personal experiences, travels, and the events he witnessed. The work provides an invaluable insider's perspective on a community frequently misrepresented in both Western and Middle Eastern scholarship, filling a critical gap in Yezidi

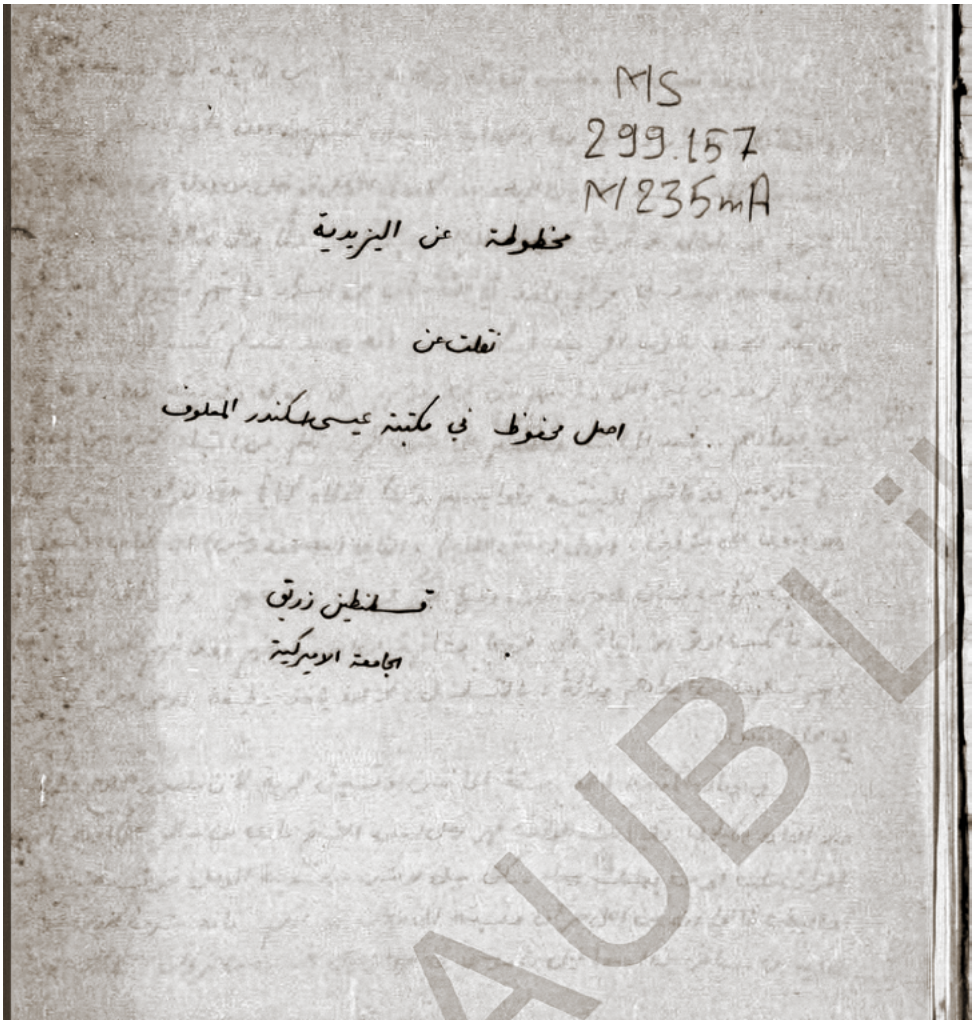
[90] Cf. Chol 1934: 73–108.

[91] Cf. *Ibid*: 109–136.

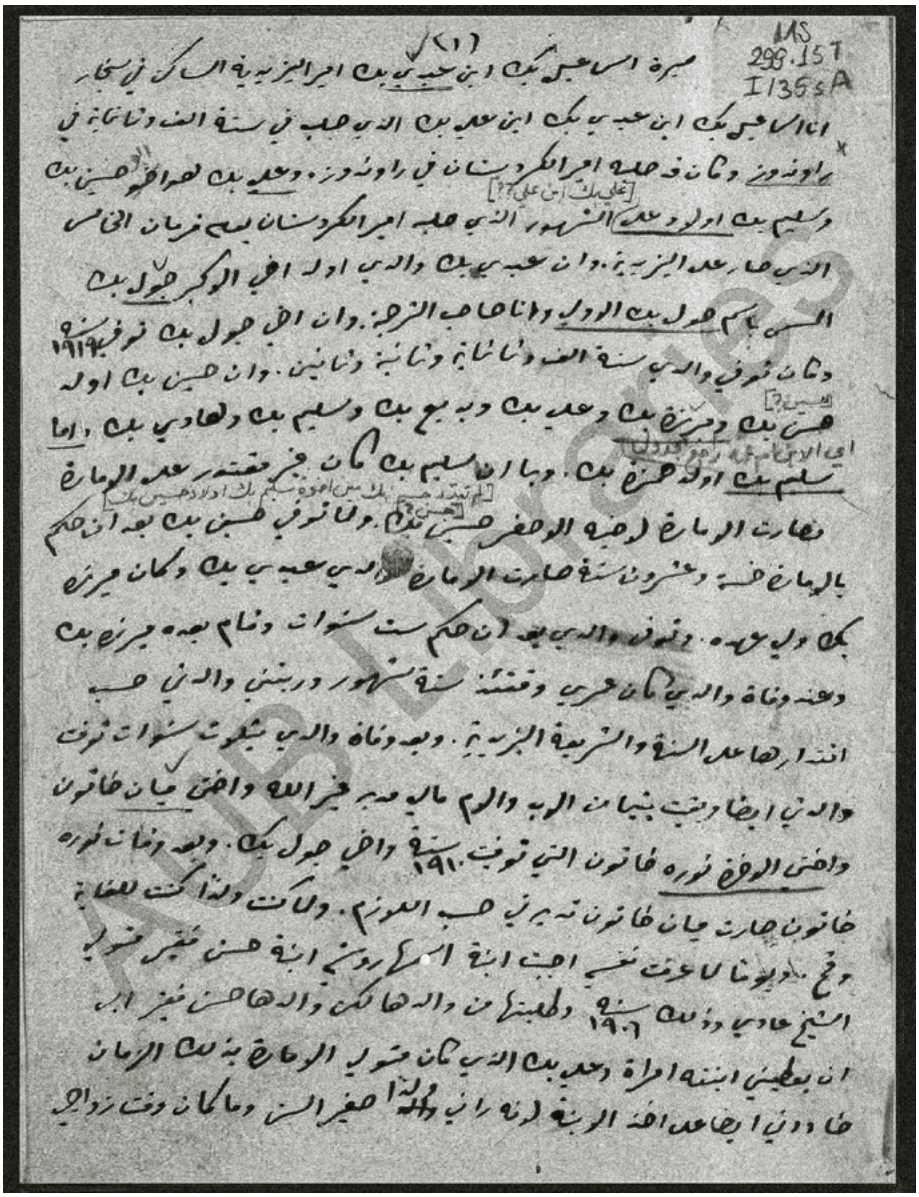
[92] *Ibid*: 1–72.

[93] The 1936 Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society features a concise review by Dunne (1936) of "The Yezidis, Past and Present by Ismail Chol-beg", recognizing it as a significant contribution to Yezidi studies, particularly for its inclusion of original Yezidi texts and firsthand accounts of historic events. The reviewer emphasises the book's value as one of the earliest academic works on the Yezidi community, praising its use of primary sources, including the autobiography of a Yezidi prince.

studies. It remains essential for understanding Yezidi history, religion, and identity, offering scholars unfiltered narratives grounded in Yezidi voices.



(I)


MS
299.157
I135sA

(II)

Figure 9, (I, II): Digital copy of the original manuscript of Ismail Chol-beg's text, MS 299.157.[94]

[94] Microfilmed by the Department of Micrographics, Jafet Memorial Library, American University of Beirut. Part I: MIC-MS, AUB 1210, Sirat Ismail bin Amir al-yezidiya: Ismail Beg bin Abdi Beg Amir Al-Yezidiya, 1–59.

As the authors of this article, we have obtained copies of the original manuscript of the book from the American University of Beirut. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first researchers to have accessed these materials. Upon reviewing the manuscript and comparing it with the 1934 printed edition, we found the contents to be identical, apart from the editorial notes, clarifications, and an introduction which was penned by Costi K. Zurayk. Accordingly, we present this review as part of our exploration of the works and legacy of Prince Ismail Chol-beg.

According to Zurayk's introduction, Ismail was neither a man of letters nor formal scholarship, thus he did not write the book himself. Rather, he dictated its contents to a scribe. This was confirmed by Wansa, the daughter of Ismail Chol-beg.[95]

Upon reviewing the book, several noteworthy points emerge that represent a significant intellectual and reformist precedent within the Yezidi context. Notably, after Ismail Chol-beg arrived in Armenia, he was warmly welcomed by the Yezidi community there. He emphasised the importance of education, urging them to send their children to school. Ismail Chol-beg observed that most Yezidis in Armenia were illiterate, with only a few exceptions, and therefore issued a license and a religious decree permitting and encouraging them to teach their children reading, writing, and learning.[96]

During his visit, some members of the Yezidi community told Ismail Chol-beg that, since the Battle of Kars between the Ottomans and the Russians, no Yezidi prince had come to see them, and as a result, they remained unfamiliar with many of their own religious customs and laws. In response, Ismail explained that his visit had a specific purpose: he had heard that they were deviating from the principles and teachings of the Yezidi faith. He subsequently called for a large gathering of the Yezidis in the area, where he delivered a significant sermon outlining dozens of core tenets of Yezidi belief, moral teachings, religious duties, and distinctions between what is permitted and forbidden in Yezidi religion.[97]

Furthermore, he urged the community to organise their religious structure by appointing a Sheikh or Pesh'imam for every five villages to oversee spiritual affairs, an arrangement that would also help in dealing more effectively with local authorities.[98] He later submitted a written version of these religious guidelines to the local government, who, according to him, accepted the document and officially recognised "Yezidi religion" as the formal religious designation. In a related incident, it appears that the

[95] Cf. Chol 1934: ش (Sh. refers to the page number, in this case page 15, in the editor's introduction to his book).

[96] Chol 1934: 13.

[97] *Ibid*: 13–15.

[98] *Ibid*: 15.

local government and the mayor summoned Ismail Chol-beg for questioning. He attended the meeting accompanied by several Yezidi *agha*s (tribal leaders). During the encounter, the mayor expressed his displeasure, accusing them of organising secret societies. Consequently, he ordered Sheikh Ismail to leave the area and proceed toward the Turkish border. Ismail Chol-beg firmly denied the accusation that he had come to form secret societies, clarifying instead that his purpose was to advise the Yezidi community and help organise their affairs to facilitate official dealings with the government. He ultimately succeeded in demonstrating this to the authorities,[99] after which he was released.

In the Yezidi villages around Erivan (renamed Yerevan in 1936), local aghas expressed concern over the community's fragmentation and lack of unity. In response, Ismail Chol-beg visited the highest-ranking cleric in the Armenian Church, the Grand Metropolitan of the Armenian Church in the Etchmiadzin region[100] near Erivan. There, he requested protection for the Yezidis, noting that they lacked representation or guardianship, and were now living under Armenian jurisdiction. He specifically asked for protection of the Yezidis residing in the districts of Gyumri,[101] Kars, and Erivan, emphasising the need to preserve their religious identity.[102]

The Patriarch agreed and pledged to protect the Yezidi community. He requested that the Yezidi emir and tribal leaders sign a formal document recognising this arrangement. In the document, it was noted that there were 72 Yezidi villages comprising approximately 350 households. The Patriarch also encouraged the establishment of schools to educate Yezidi children, to which the leaders responded by affirming that the emir had already issued a fatwa permitting education.[103]

After leaving Armenia, in February 1909, Ismail Chol-beg planned a visit to Tiflis and, upon his arrival, introduced himself to the local authorities. In his memoirs, Ismail Chol-beg recounts a meeting convened by the Viceroy of the Caucasus, Count Illarion Ivanovich Vorontsov-Dashkov. During the meeting, Ismail presented himself as the leader, sheikh, and prince of the Yezidis. Among his observations, Ismail Chol-beg

[99] Cf. *Ibid*: 16.

[100] Etchmiadzin Cathedral, located in the city of Vagharshapat (commonly known as Etchmiadzin), about 20 km west of Yerevan, is the spiritual centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church and is often regarded as the oldest cathedral in the world (early 4th century).

[101] Until 1924, the city was called Alexandropol, and between 1924 and 1990 it was known as Leninakan. Therefore, during his visit, it could not have been referred to by that name.

[102] Cf. Chol 1935: 21.

[103] Cf. *Ibid*: 21f. The Yezidis were educated before in accordance with their own tradition, and traditional education – through contact with Pirs and Sheikhs – was not prohibited.

highlights the viceroy's admission that his knowledge of the Yezidis was quite limited: Although they were aware of the existence of a Yezidi sect, they knew little about its beliefs, mistakenly assuming it was similar to those of the Kurds. They later realised that the Yezidi doctrine was, in fact, distinct both from Kurdish traditions and from Islam.[104]

In his own account, Ismail Chol-beg recalled submitting a memorandum in Russian to the Tsar's viceroy, in which he expressed hope that Russian forces might one day reach Mount Sinjar to protect the Yezidis from persistent attacks.

After visiting Tiflis, Ismail Chol-beg travelled to Batumi, and from there to Istanbul before returning to Iraq. Yet, due to internal rivalries particularly with Said Beg, the son of Maya Khatun he was unable to secure the leadership of all Yezidis. Instead, he settled in Sinjar, where he gained strong support among the local tribes, who acknowledged him as their Mir.[105]

In a different context, Ismail Chol-beg recounts that Hamo Sharo and Dawud al-Dawud invited him to return to Sinjar to serve as their emir, particularly after learning that he had come into possession of the Sanjaq (the sacred Yezidi standard).[106] He accepted their invitation and returned to Sinjar, where he played a notable role during the events of World War I. Elsewhere in his text, recalling his visit to Mosul, he states:

> When I went to Mosul, I made forty seals bearing the names of the prominent leaders of the mountain [i.e., Sinjar's tribal chiefs] and kept them with me. I thought the fighting between the Turks, Russians, and others was fierce, and if something happened to us, how would I gather these *aghas* again? So, I made these seals in anticipation of such emergencies.[107]

Ismail Chol-beg soon began engaging in formal political correspondence, using both his personal seal and those of the Sinjari *aghas*. When the British forces entered Baghdad, he dispatched the first letter sealed with his insignia through a Christian messenger named Oussi (or Yusuf) to the British authorities. The letter appealed for British support and protection for the Yezidis against the Turks.[108]

In response, the British sent a letter written by Yusuf addressed to Ismail Chol-beg and the Sinjari *aghas*. The letter expressed gratitude for the Yezidis' protection of local Christians and affirmed the British government's willingness to assist the Yezidi community.

[104] Cf. Chol 1934: 22–23.
[105] CF. *Ibid*: 23–24.
[106] Cf. *Ibid*: 47.
[107] *Ibid*: 55.
[108] Cf. *Ibid*: 55–56.

Ismail Beg Chol established himself as a recognised leader and chieftain in the eyes of the British authorities, actively requesting weapons and equipment to defend Sinjar. The British treated him accordingly, acknowledging his leadership role.[109] British Lieutenant Colonel G. Leachman[110] offered him the position of deputy political governor of Sinjar under the British administration. However, Ismail declined the post, recommending instead that it be granted to Hamo Sharo, He expressed a different request: to be restored to his hereditary rights within the Yezidi emirate, particularly the revenues and custodianship over the Lalish Temple and other sacred shrines.[111]

Ismail reports that Leachman issued him an official document (decree) designating him as the "Prince of Princes" (*Mîrê Mîran*) of the Yezidis, a formal acknowledgment of his authority. A separate certificate was granted to Said Beg, identifying him as the spiritual leader, whereas Ismail was recognised as the temporal or worldly leader. These developments bolstered his legitimacy in Sinjar, where the local population credited him with securing British protection and liberating them from Turkish domination.[112]

In the realm of education and social reform, Ismail was a pioneer. He enrolled his children in formal schooling. His son, Abd al-Karim became the first Yezidi to graduate from Baghdad's Teachers' College, and later served as a schoolteacher in the town of Baadre. His daughters also attended school, setting an example which inspired many Yezidis in Sinjar, Sheikhan, Bashiqa, and Bahzani to do the same.[113]

The second section of the book focuses on Yezidi beliefs, customs, traditions, and religious holidays. It is presented in a more refined and professional Arabic style compared to the first section, which employs numerous colloquial terms.

The third section of the book addresses historical matters, focusing in part on the tribal composition and genealogies of the Sinjar region. It traces Yezidi tribal lineages back to the era of Prince Bedagh Beg's grandfather and the time of Koçek Ibrahim, establishing a socio-historical framework for the Yezidi presence in Sinjar.

A significant portion is dedicated to recounting episodes of genocide, persecution, and betrayal carried out by Ottoman authorities, beginning with Suleiman Pasha. The author recalls the duplicity of Suleiman Pasha who, after offering the Yezidis

[109] Cf. *Ibid*: 60–66.

[110] Col. G. Leachman (1880–1920), a British army officer, played a central role in Mosul after the British occupation in November 1918. He was accompanied by Yezidi leaders Hamo Sharo and Ismail Chol-beg, the latter of whom facilitated British entry into Sinjar. In 1919, Hamo Sharo declared loyalty to the British and was appointed Government Agent of Sinjar, enabling Yezidis to reclaim villages which had been seized from them by Arab clans. By 1920, Yousif Rassam, a Christian, was appointed District Chief of Sinjar with Yezidi approval. Leachman later visited the Yezidis of Sheikhan and Lalish, where he was welcomed by Mayan Khatun, regent of Prince Said Beg, in an effort to secure their confidence (cf. Ali 2019a: 91).

[111] Cf. Chol 1934: 68.

[112] Cf. *Ibid*: 69–70.

[113] Cf. *Ibid*: 71–72.

assurances of safety and requesting that they descend from Mount Sinjar and surrender their weapons, ordered their massacre. Yezidi women and children were subsequently taken captive.[114]

Following the review and analysis of this book, several observations can be made which highlight its critical significance:

First, there is a noticeable variation in linguistic style across the sections. The first section is written in a language rich with colloquial vocabulary and expressions commonly used in Iraq during the period, while the second and third sections adopt a more formal and refined linguistic register, suggesting either a shift in intended audience or a collaborative editing process.

Second, the author introduces several terms and concepts that appear unfamiliar or uncommon within traditional Yezidi religious discourse. The sources of these terms remain unclear. It is possible that Ismail Chol-beg drew on personal sources, or that intellectual collaborators contributed such terminology for political, ideological, or nationalistic reasons. A prominent example is the word *Yazdan*,[115] which was not widely used in the Yezidi religious language of the time. In fact, it is well possible that he introduced this term into Yezidi discourse. As Constantine Costi K. Zurayk notes in his introduction to Ismail Chol-beg's text, in an interview with Ismail's daughter, Wansa, Zurayk established that Ismail had dictated his autobiography to others, who wrote it down on his behalf. In the dialog and interaction of the transcription process, it is likely that 'new' terminology and concepts became part of the final narrative.

Third, some of the historical claims presented in the book lack corroborating evidence, especially those linking Yezidi origins to ancient periods, such as the era of Persian kings. These assertions, while symbolically powerful, raise questions regarding historical accuracy and intent.

Finally, the repeated use of the Yezidi terms *millat* and *qawm* (literary mean people and nation) throughout the book is noteworthy. It underscores a conscious articulation of the Yezidis as a distinct and autonomous collective, suggesting the presence of an emerging national or communal identity at the time of writing.

In conclusion, we can say that *The Yezidis, Past and Present* remains a foundational text for those interested in Yezidi culture and history. Its unique combination of original religious traditions and personal narrative offers invaluable insights into a commu-

[114] Cf. *Ibid*: 110.

[115] He introduced numerous concepts and terms which were otherwise absent from the traditional Yezidi theological and religious framework of the time; these appear modern and contemporaneous, suggesting that he adopted them from external writings that advanced such notions. It is most likely that his source was the Syriac manuscript Aqaid al-Yezidiyya fi sual wa jawab (Yezidi Beliefs in Question and Answer) written by the priest Ishaq al-Bartali.

nity that has often been misunderstood, misrepresented and periodically overlooked. For scholars and readers seeking an authentic understanding of the Yezidis, Chol's work is an essential resource.

In line with the title of this article – The Struggle for Modern Yezidi Identity – it is important to emphasise that, just as new elements emerged in the practical activities of Ismail Beg, his book likewise introduced innovative perspectives that contributed to the modernisation of Yezidi religion.

Ismail Chol-beg's Conception of Yezidi Identity and Its Outcomes

Despite the rather fragmentary sources of his views, it can quickly be seen that his understanding of Yezidi identity is very unorthodox. The fact that many of his views were not rooted in the Yezidi tradition suggests that they were influenced by nationalist ideas. Assyrian nationalists in particular seemed to have had a significant influence on him.

By examining newly available sources and documents, Ismail Chol-beg's concept of Yezidi history can be divided into three main stages. In his writings on the Ancient Era, he portrays the Yezidis (originally known as Azday)[116] as a people with a history spanning some 4,000 years, and declares them to be ancient Assyrians, rulers of great empires, pioneers in shipbuilding, and authors of one of the oldest sacred texts known to man. His texts on the Islamic Era depict how the Yezidis faced a principal adversary in Islam, how their political authority was largely destroyed on the one hand, but capable of renewing itself thanks to its resilience on the other. According to him, it was in this period that the Yezidis chose to name themselves "Yezidis" after Yazid ibn Muawiya ibn Abu Sufyan (d. 683) in place of the former name "Azday". Finally, in the Sheikh Adi Era, Sheikh Adi emerged as the sublime holy figure of the Yezidis, establishing a spiritual legacy that endures to the present day.

Carrying the Torch and Legacy in Motion: His Children and the Living Impact of His Ideas

Upon returning from his travels from 1908 to 1909, Ismail Chol-beg gave three of his sons[117] certain names that provide some insight into his views. He named his second el-

[116] Named by him or he suggested that they were originally named Azday.

[117] The four children mentioned here had an older half-brother, Abdulkarim Beg. His mother, who died shortly after his birth, was not a member of the Mir family and was Ismail Beg's first wife, whom he married at the age of 18. Abdulkarim was one of the first Yezidis to receive a school education and was the first Yezidi teacher in Baghdad. He played no significant role in the political life of the Yezidis.

dest son Yezidkhan Beg. He named his two other sons Bayezid Beg and Muawiya Beg.[118] His son Yezidkhan Beg, who was taught Yezidiness on his father's lap at a tender age, was one of the first Yezidis to become active in publishing texts. In 1961 he published an article in a newspaper entitled in Arabic: "*Ha Ulaa hum al-Yezidiyyan* (*These are the Yezidis)*" in which he explained some aspects of Yezidi identity. Like his father, he emphasised his family's Umayyad origins and spoke of the "Yezidi nation" using the Arabic term "*qawm*".[119]

His third son, Bayezid Beg (Prince Bayazid Al-Umawi) went on to found the first Yezidi political movement. He opened an office in Baghdad named "Call of the Umayyads"[120] and proclaimed an Arab-Umayyad origin of the Yezidis. He also wrote several articles in a well-known *al-Turath al-Shabi,*[121] in Baghdad. He also created an extensive family tree of his family, which he traced directly back to the Umayyads.[122]

All three brothers concurred on distinguishing the Yezidis from the Kurds and in their conviction that the Yezidis were of Umayyad origin. Muawiya Beg largely adopted the views of his father and brothers, but took a different path to them, proclaiming that the Yezidis were Zoroastrians.[123] He also claimed that the Yezidis were of Assyrian origin, as his father had always emphasised. Their sister Wansa played a major, if somewhat controversial role in this period of Yezidi history. Her extensive knowledge of Yezidi heritage and identity was firmly rooted in the tradition of her father, and she also seems to have possessed a charismatic ability to convey it to others.[124] This is also illustrated in a report about her, which was written shortly before World War II, and is mentioned by Callot:

> She had retained a multitude of memories from her childhood surrounded by her family, in which the wonderful often mixed with reality, and she spoke for hours with her fascinated friends about the past glory of the Yezidi people […].[125]

[118] Bayezid Beg is likely modelled on Yazid I, while Muawiya Beg appears to be named after Yazid's father, Muawiya ibn Abu Sufyan.

[119] Cf. Ismail Beg 1961: 151–153.

[120] The Arab Call for the Yezidi Umayyads (al-Da'wa al-Arabiya fi bini Umayya al-Yezidiya) came from Bayezid Ismail Chol-beg, who referred to himself as Prince Mir Bayezid al-Umawi (the Umayyad), and declared that the Yezidis ethnic heritage is Arab Umayyad. This theory is considered one of the paradoxes in the history of the Yezidis in contemporary Iraq, because, in one way or another, it coloured the general and the elitist opinion in Iraq about the religious and national affiliations of the Yezidis. For more details cf. Ali 2019a: 230–235.

[121] A Monthly Magazine Issued by the Folklore Centre, Ministry of Information, Republic of Iraq.

[122] Umawi, al – (undated), Umara tayfat al-Umawiyyn al-Yezidiyya [Princes of the Yezidi Umayyad Religion), manuscript, in the archives of the Yezidi Spiritual Council in Georgia (Cf. AYSCG).

[123] Cf. Yezidi 1983.

[124] Cf. Haji 2021.

[125] Callot 1991: 8.

In Syria, which was under the French Mandate, she requested the latter for Yezidi autonomy in Sinjar and for the establishment of Yezidi armed forces. Almost 70 years later, Wansa spoke in detail about the ethnicity of the Yezidis; she strictly refused to count the Yezidis as belonging to the Kurds and emphasised their Umayyad origins.[126] Thus, it would appear that she shared her father's rejection of the notion that Yezidis are Kurds, and embraced her people's Umayyad origins as he had. It should be noted that Wansa is a historical figure worthy of research of her own.

In the context within which the Yezidis found themselves during Ismail's lifetime, Kurdish and Arab nationalist movements sought to shape political developments by means of assimilatory tactics to consolidate their power and influence. This gave rise to false claims that the Yezidis were other ethnics. Within this dynamic, Ismail Chol-beg fostered relations with these groups, whereby he felt it necessary at times to subjugate his own concept of Yezidi identity in the interests of diplomacy and cooperation. This is particularly the case in relation to the Kurdish nationalist movement *Khoybun*. It is worth noting that the Yezidi religion lent itself to this duality.

At this juncture, let us examine the main features of Ismail Chol-beg's concept of Yezidi identity and heritage. Surprisingly, he seemed to find no contradiction in considering himself the descendant of an Arab dynasty. Furthermore, when he encountered the nationalism of other groups with whom he interacted, he forged his own, coherent, glorious history of the Yezidis. By contrast, in relation to religion, he was a true traditionalist, leaving little or no room for interpretation. To him, religion was the unifying characteristic of Yezidi identity that lay at its core.

The ancient Assyrians were glorified by several Western figures with whom Ismail Chol-beg often associated. Ismail responded to this by creating a great past for the Yezidis, one in which the Yezidis ruled over vast empires and defeated neighbouring ones. To him, they were the first shipbuilders and descendants of the ancient Assyrians, who were highly glorified in their time. If one were to categorise him within the framework of current thinking on nationalism, it is undeniable that he presented a richness of ideas with the necessary plausibility which led to his constructing Yezidi identity in a manner that is still relevant to this day.

[126] Between 2007 and 2009, a Yezidi author, Bedel Faqir Haji, conducted a series of interviews with Wansa. These not only documented her family's history but also provided valuable insights into her perception of Yezidi identity. The collected interviews were subsequently published as a book (cf. Haji 2021).

Conclusion

Prince Ismail Chol-beg, who lived through the first third of the twentieth century with its profound transformations, may be regarded as a pioneer of the Yezidi cultural, social, and political renaissance. He was the first to encourage Yezidis to pursue formal education by enrolling in schools, and he authored the first Yezidi autobiography, in which he recounted the hardships and adversities he endured for a cause he deeply believed in, and steadfastly defended. Although he was repeatedly wronged by members of his own princely family, he never abandoned his struggle, which he continued until his death.

Ismail Chol-beg came into contact with various nationalist groups at a young age and collaborated with some of them. Concerning his relationship with other nationalist ideologies, it is evident that he consistently rejected any ideas that undermined Yezidi identity and firmly regarded the Yezidis as a distinct *qawm* and *millat*. Nevertheless, his positive references to Kurdish nationalism in his correspondence with and through the *Khoybun* organisation, despite contradicting his other writings, demonstrate that he fully understood the concept of nationalism and possessed a pragmatic approach to his interactions within the political sphere in which he found himself. While he engaged with these broader nationalist ideas, he also maintained a particular affinity with the Assyrian Christians, who, at this time, aspired to build an independent entity in the Nineveh Plain. Some collaboration took place between them and the Yezidis, however, it became impossible to advance this goal due to its rejection by the British Mandate. Nevertheless, there is no documented evidence that Ismail aspired to the establishment of an independent Yezidi state. Furthermore, his interactions with various political and nationalist movements were often perceived as inconsistent or contradictory, particularly regarding his proposals and views on the Assyrians, Kurds, and others. However, when one examines the documents which form the core of this research in their entirety, it is undeniable that his actions were consistently guided by political acumen, if somewhat limited by a certain pragmaticism which was necessary in the pursuit of his people's cause.

The findings of this study indicate that Ismail Chol-beg's views were profoundly shaped by nationalism, understood in the context of Yezidi identity. This arguably makes him the first Yezidi nationalist in terms of identity within a traditionally non-ideological Yezidi context. It may be argued that Prince Ismail Chol-beg was a man far ahead of his time, one whose ideas and actions were not fully grasped by his fellow Yezidis, and who was, in many respects, misunderstood by the very generation

to which he belonged. Nevertheless, his ideas were successfully handed down to his descendants and continue to resonate today. His ideas also found supporters among the Yezidis of the South Caucasus, particularly in Georgia, where initiatives for the modernisation of Yezidi religion are currently emerging and for which Ismail Beg has served as an inspiration. Thus, his legacy is a valuable resource for advancing the question of Yezidi identity, both in academic and non-academic spheres.

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ცვლილებების პიონერი გზაგასაყარზე, სინჯარიდან კავკასიამდე: ამირა (მირი) ისმაილ ჩოლ ბეგი და ბრძოლა ეზიდობის თანამედროვე იდენტობისთვის

აბსტრაქტი:

ეზიდი ამირა მირი ისმაილ ჩოლ ბეგი (გ. 1933) მეოცე საუკუნის ერთი-ერთი ყველაზე საინტრესო და სადავო ეზიდი პიროვნებაა. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ მისი ცხოვრება და საქმიანობა რამდენიმე ნაშრომშია აღწერილი, მათ შორის, მის ავტობიოგრაფიაში, დღემდე არ არსებობს პასუხი იმ კითხვაზე, თუ როგორ აღიქვამდა ის ეზიდურ იდენტობას. ეს კვლევა წარმოადგენს პირველ სისტემურ მცდელობას, გავაანალიზოთ მირ ისმაილ ჩოლ ბეგის გაგება ეზიდური იდენტობის შესახებ და შევაფასოთ, რამდენად განაპირობა ის ნაციონალიზმის ზრდამ. ამიტომ, სტატია ჯერ იკვლევს ჩოლ ბეგის შეხვედრას ნაციონალისტურ იდეებთან, შემდეგ კი მისი განცხადებებისა და გამონათქვამების საფუძველზე აღადგენს მის კონცეფციას ეზიდი იდენტობის შესახებ. იდენტობის შესახებ მისი მოსაზრებები ფრაგმენტული და გაფანტულია, რაც აუცილებელს ხდის მრავალფეროვანი წყაროების გამოყენებას, როგორიცაა მისი წერილები და სხვა ტექსტები, მისი ავტობიოგრაფია და ორი გამოქვეყნებული ნაშრომი, ევროპელი მოგზაურების წყაროები, რომლებიც მას შეხვედრიან; ასევე აქამდე გამოუქვეყნებელი საარქივო მასალები, რომლებიც გაფანტულია მრავალ ენაზე, მათ შორის სომხურ, ქართულ, გერმანულ, რუსულ და ფრანგულ ენებზე, ოსმალურ, თურქულ, არაბული და ინგლისურ ენებზე, რომლებიც ერთობლივად ასახავს მისი საქმიანობის ფართო სპექტრს, მის კავშირებსა და გავლენის სფეროს. ამ კვლევის მიზანია მის ისმაილ ჩოლ ბეგის მიერ ეზიდური იდენტობის შესახებ გამოთქმული აზრების თავმოყრა და კონტექსტუალიზება, რათა მისი სრული სურათი შეიქმნას.

საკვანძო სიტყვები:

ისმაილ ხოლ-ბეგი, ეზიდური იდენტობა, ეზიდი თავადი, ეზიდი თავადები, ეთნიკურობა, ნაციონალიზმი.

.....

Majid Hassan Ali, Diar Al Omar

Pîonerê guhartinê ser xaçerêya ji Şingalê heta Kavkazê: Mîr Îsmaîl Çol-beg – xebat û tekoşîna bo nasnameya nû ya êzdiyan.

Kurtî:

Mîrê êzdiyan Îsmaîl Çol-beg (sala mirinê 1933) yek ji wan kesayetiyên herî balkêş û karîgerê êzdiyan yên sedsala bîstan bûye. Her çende jiyan û çalakiyên wî di çend berhem û nivîsînanda hatine dokûmêntkirin, di nav wanada jî pirtoka autobîografiya wî, lê pirsa ka ew nasnameya êzdiyan çawa fehmkirîye, heta niha bi awayek akadêmî û sistematîk nehatiye vekolînkirin. Ji ber vê yekê, ev lêkolîn hewldan û lêkolîna sistematîke yekemîne, ku têgihîştina wî ya li ser nasnameya êzdiyan analîz bike û binêre, ka ew (Mîr Îsmaîl Çol-beg) çiqasî hatiye bandorkirin bi bilindbûna astê neteweperestiyê (nasyonalîzmê) li wî serdemî. Ji bo vê armancê, ev gotar

berê xwe dide lêkolîna hevdîtinên Çol-beg bi raman û fikrên neteweperestiyê, û paşê li ser bingehên gotin û axavtinên wî, fehmkirina wî ya nasnameya êzdiyan ava dike. Her çende ramanan û fikrên wî yên li ser nasname, îdentîtêtê û nasyonalîzmê ne yekgirtîye, perçeperçe û belavbûyîne, ji ber vê ye ku ew şertê lazim dikin ku jimareke mezin ya jêder û çavkaniyan, wek nameyên wî û nivîsînên din yên ku hatine danan bêne bikar anîn, her wisa autobîografiya wî û du berhemên wî yên çapkirî, dîsa raportên gerokên ewropî, yên ku bi wîra hevdîtin kirine, her wisa matêrîyalên arşîvî ku heta niha bi berfireyî nehatine naskirin, ku bi gelek zimanan hatine nivîsandin, wekî zimanên ermenî, gurcî, almanî, rûsî, fransî, osmanî, erebî û înglîzî. Bi tevahî, van çavkaniyan bi rêzeke berfireh ya çalakiyên wî, torên eleqetiyên wî û bandora wî nîşan didin. Ji ber vê yekê, armanca vê vekolînêye hemû referansên Çol-beg yên li ser nasnameya êzdiyan komkirî di çarçoveyeke şertdarda wan bi cî bike, da ku şiklekî giştî û tevahî ya fikir û ramanên wî were avakirin li ser mesela nasnameya êzdiyan.

Peyvên sereke:

Îsmail Çol-beg; nasname û îdêntîtêta êzdiyan; êzdî; mîrên êzdiyan; etnîk (nasnameya neteweyî); neteweperestî (nasiyonalizm).