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Editorial

It is my pleasure, as Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Yezidi Studies (IJYS), to present to our esteemed readers the second issue of our peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal. Our aim is to provide a rigorous academic platform dedicated to the study of Yezidi religion, including its structure, history, culture, and spiritual and social heritage from all perspectives, seeking to move beyond the distortions, simplifications, and non-scholarly approaches that have long characterised this field.

This issue represents another step toward strengthening the traditions of specialised academic research on Yezidi affairs in general and Yezidi studies in particular. It features original contributions from scholars around the world, covering themes in history, religion, anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, and related fields, thereby enriching knowledge about one of the region's small religious minorities.

The Editorial Board has ensured the highest standards of academic review and double-blind peer evaluation to guarantee the quality, objectivity, and originality of the published studies. We also reaffirm our commitment to encouraging interdisciplinary approaches, supporting early-career researchers, and providing a rigorous scholarly platform befitting the importance of this field of study.

This issue includes five peer-reviewed articles and a book review, beginning with the joint contribution by Majid Hassan Ali and Diar Al Omar, titled *The Pioneer of Change at the Crossroads from Sinjar to the Caucasus: Prince (Mîr) Ismail Chol-beg and the Struggle for Modern Yezidi Identity.* In this article, they examine the role of the Yezidi prince Ismail Chol-beg (d. 1933), one of the most intriguing and controversial Yezidi figures of the twentieth century. They present the first systematic attempt to understand his perspectives on Yezidi identity, an aspect largely overlooked in earlier research, reconstructing his views through his letters, dictated texts, autobiography, published works, European travel accounts, and multilingual archival material. By assembling these scattered sources, the study offers a comprehensive account of his ideas, activities, networks, and influence.

The second article, by Victoria Arakelova, titled *How Close is ʿAli to God? On the Status of ʿAli in the Yezidi Tradition*, investigates the place of Imam ʿAli within Yezidi religious heritage. Although the deification of ʿAli is characteristic of certain extremist Shiʿi groups, his role in the Yezidi religious minority has not previously been examined in depth. Owing to notable parallels between Yezidis and some non-mainstream Shiʿi milieus, the study analyses Yezidi religious texts in which ʿAli appears repeatedly and sometimes prominently. While the Yezidi religious minority does not attribute divine status to him, the article shows that

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his functional qualities and unique contextual role suggest that he once held a special, perhaps significant, position in Yezidi tradition.

The third article, by Isabel Broian, titled *Soviet Propaganda and the Integration of the Yezidis into the Communist Society during the Korenizatsiya Policy (1923–1934)*, examines the arrival of Yezidis in the South Caucasus following their migration from the Ottoman Empire. Living a semi-nomadic life and relying on oral tradition, they encountered a new Soviet system that, through the korenizatsiya (indigenisation) policy, granted minority groups broad cultural rights as part of a larger effort to integrate them into the communist project. Through archival sources and printed materials, the article shows how Bolshevik propaganda sought to transform Yezidi traditional life, promote Yezidi-language education, and instil Marxist-Leninist values, while simultaneously undermining the influence of religious and tribal leaders. Consequently, elements of Yezidi identity, such as religion and customary practices, were labelled as "backward remnants" of the past.

The fourth article, by Janelle Carlson, titled *The Slow Slog of Genocide: New Understandings of Yezidi Approaches to Survival and Justice*, argues that genocide does not end with the cessation of direct killing. As defined in Article 6(c) of the Rome Statute, genocide also includes the deliberate imposition of conditions of life intended to bring about a group's destruction. The article contends that understanding this slow, grinding dimension of genocide requires attending both to how affected communities describe the violence and to how states, international organisations, and humanitarian actors respond to it. Drawing on interviews and the work of local scholars and activists, the study shows how genocide against the Yezidis persists through three gaps in the international response: inadequate living conditions, the radicalisation of populations in Al-Hol Camp, and failure to support Yezidi strategies of survival. It concludes that justice requires not only prosecuting perpetrators but also restoring the conditions necessary for survivors to live.

The final research article, by Rustam Rzgoyan, titled *Repression of the Yezidis in the Armenian and Georgian SSRs in 1930–1940*, analyses state policies targeting Yezidis during Stalin's era. Like other peoples of the Soviet Union, Yezidis experienced repression and internal displacement, albeit to a lesser degree than in central Russia. While the campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s weakened the Yezidis and reduced the authority of tribal elites, they did not dismantle their social structure, which remains cohesive to this day. The article argues that these measures ultimately broke the historical isolation of Yezidi communities and accelerated their integration into Soviet society.

This issue also includes a book review by Peter Nicolaus of Benjamin Raßbach's *Landscapes of Resistance: Narratives around Sacred Places in Sinjar (Iraq) and the Islamic State's Genocide against Yezidis* (2024). Nicolaus highlights the scholarly value of the work and its

contribution to Sinjar and Yezidi studies. He commends Raßbach's innovative "narrative mapping" of sacred places and his careful integration of oral tradition, legends, and stories surrounding Yezidi shrines. Nicolaus emphasises the dual role of these sites as both sources of internal political tension and symbols of a unified Yezidi religious identity. He also notes the recent trend toward more standardised religious interpretations, shaped by ongoing political upheavals and conflict, observing that all Yezidi political actors utilise religious symbols to advance their agendas while claiming to represent the broader community.

I extend my sincere gratitude to all the contributors to this issue, to the reviewers for their rigorous scholarly efforts, and to the technical and administrative teams for their work in producing this volume. I am also grateful for the ongoing support of our partners in research centres, universities, and academic institutions that continue to follow and encourage the journal's mission.

We hope this issue will serve as a valuable contribution to Yezidi scholarship as well as Middle Eastern studies, and open new avenues for scholarly dialogue on topics still in need of deeper investigation.

Majid Hassan Ali
Editor-in-Chief

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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.

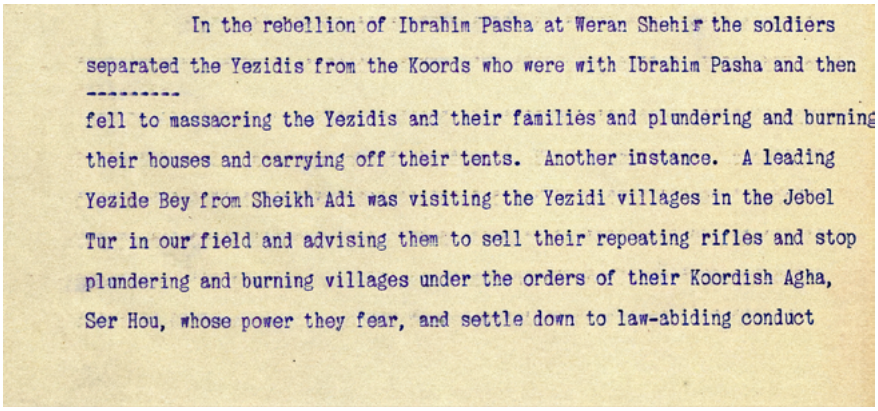
[17] Cf. Muradyan 2013: 126–138.

[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).

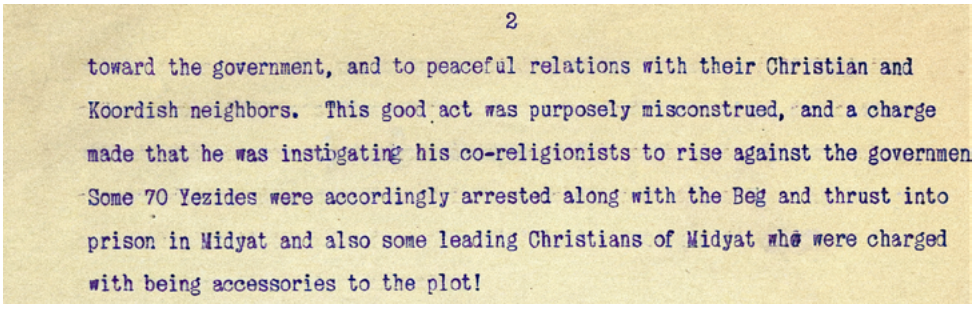
[20] There are several reports about his activities, including some submitted to the Ottoman security authorities, accusing Prince Ismail Chol-beg of communicating with the Armenians to form a Yezidi organisation complicit with the Armenians, and of converting the Yezidis to Christianity (for more details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

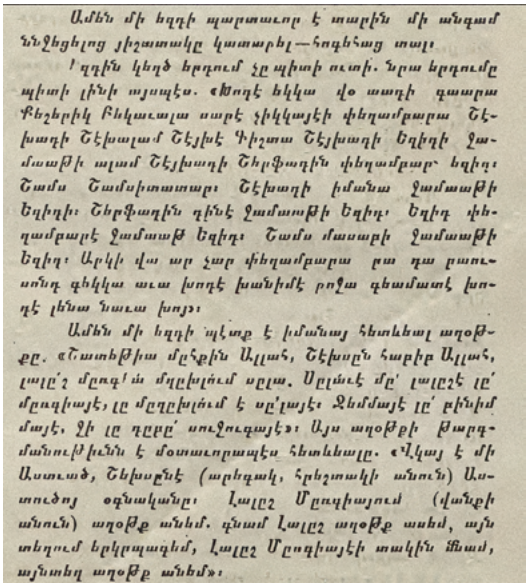
[32] Cf. Dirr 1919: 571–574.

[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.

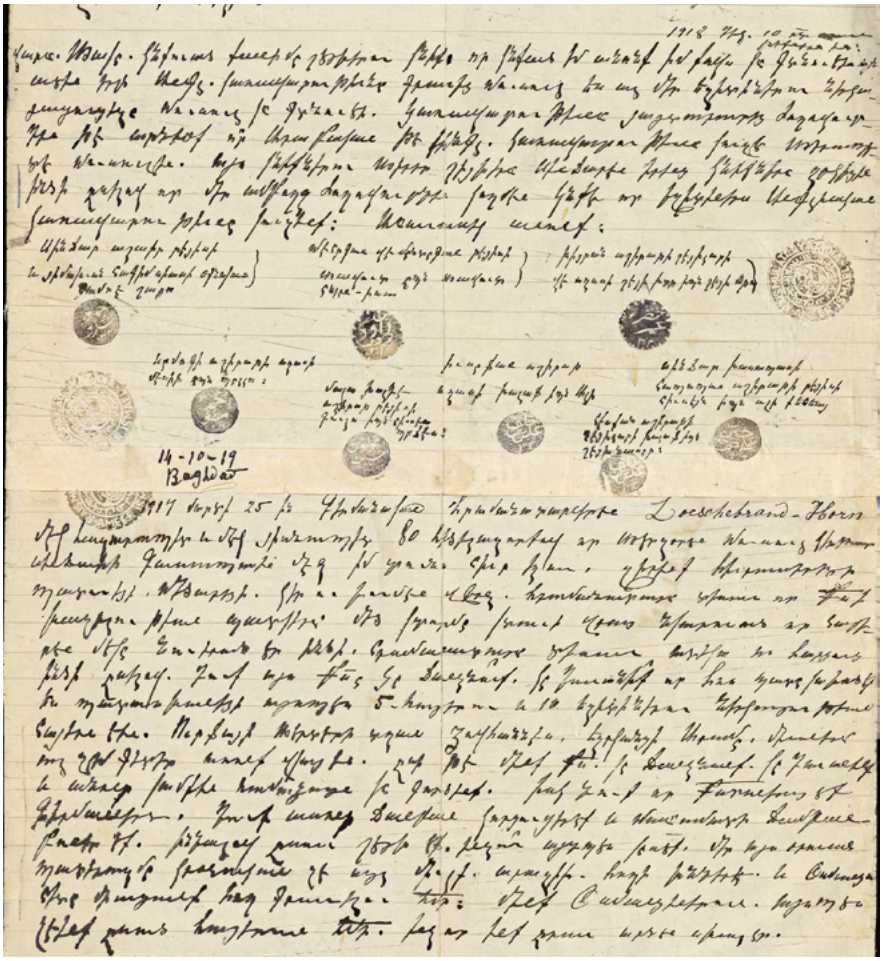


Figure 4: An excerpt from one of Ismail Chol-beg's letters, bearing the seals of various leaders.[53]

[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]

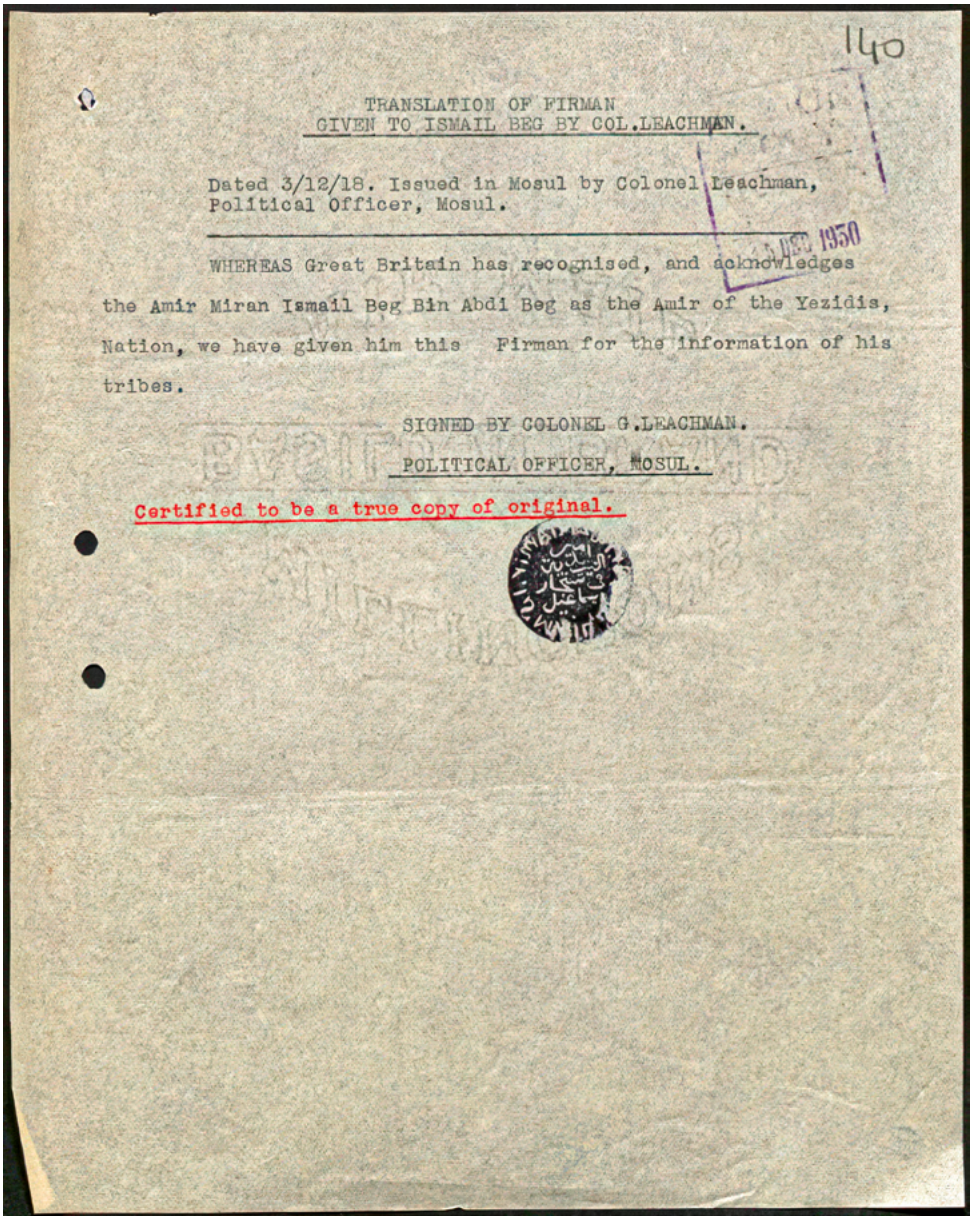
At the end of 1918, the British authorities in Mosul issued a decree officially recognising Ismail Chol-beg as the Emir of the Yezidis:

> 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.

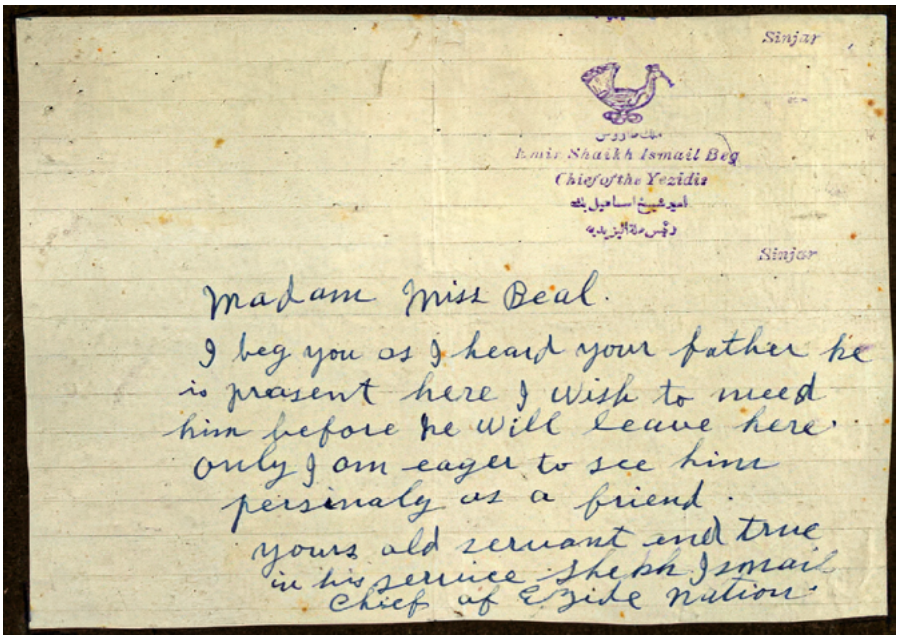
[66] Cf. *Ibid*: 163.

[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).

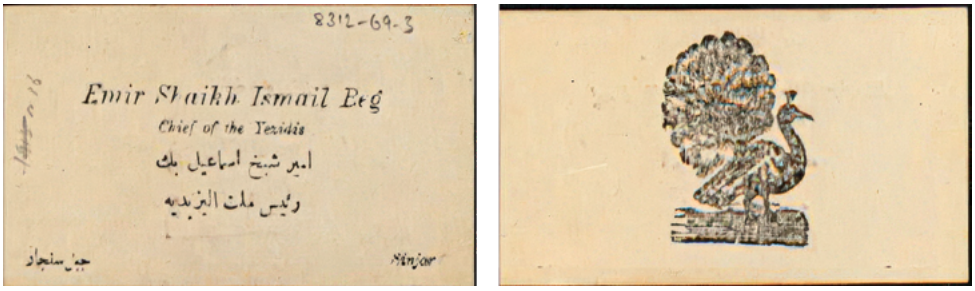


Figure 8: Ismail Chol-beg's visiting card from 1916.[72]

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

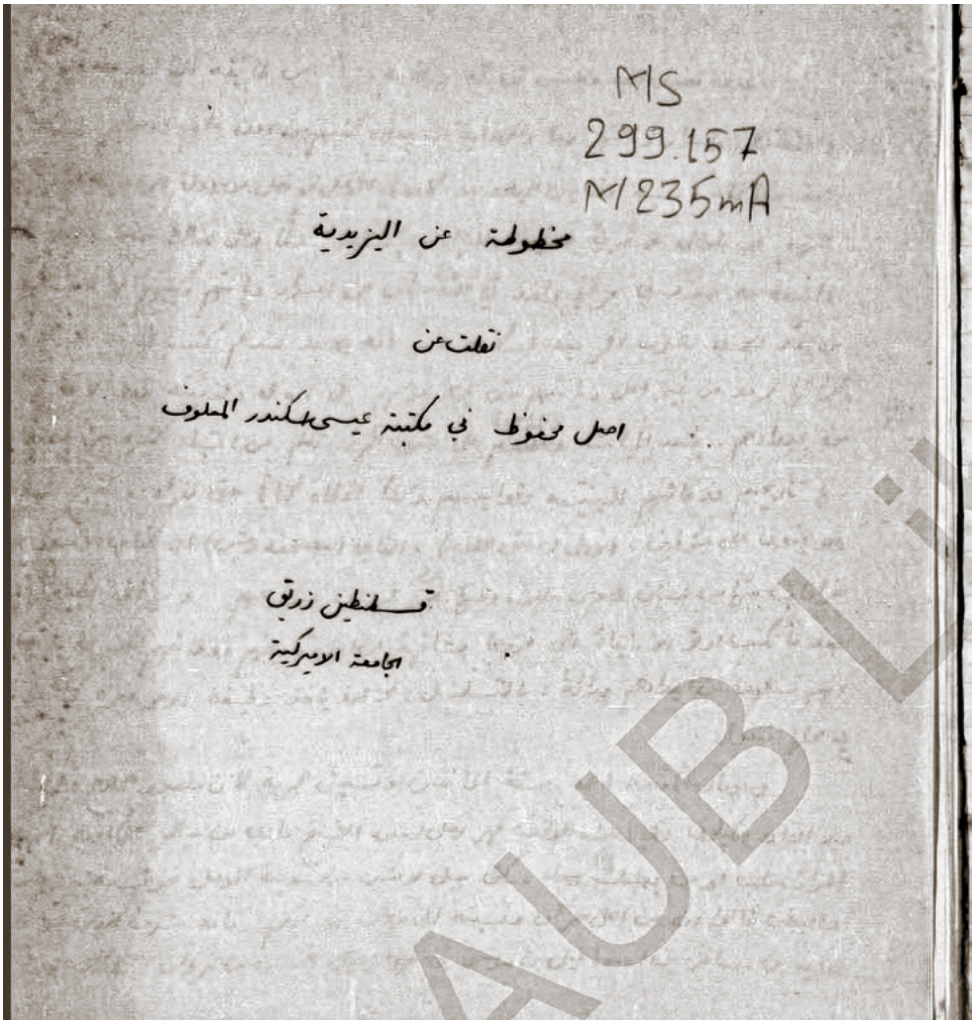
[90] Cf. Chol 1934: 73–108.

[91] Cf. *Ibid*: 109–136.

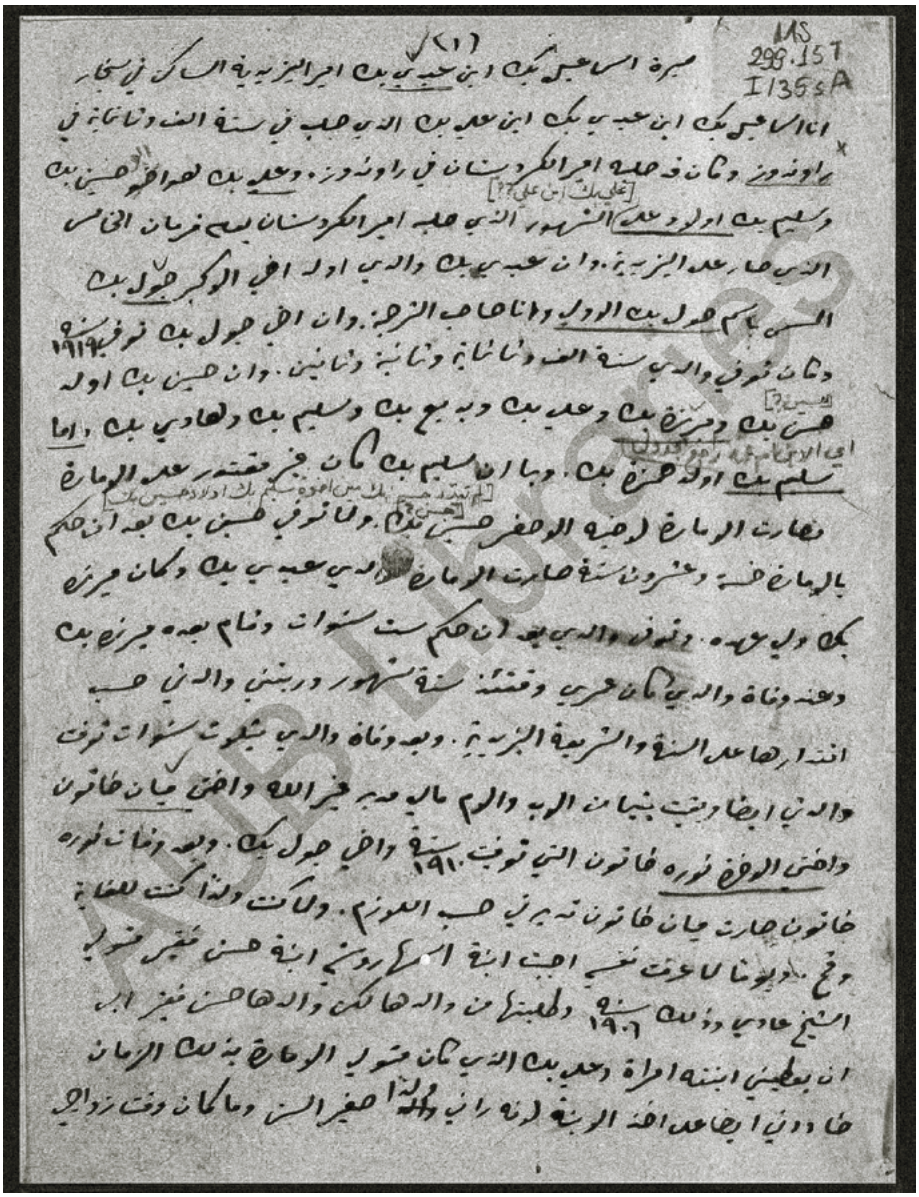
[92] *Ibid*: 1–72.

[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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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).

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How Close is ʻAli to God? On the Status of ʻAli in the Yezidi Tradition

Abstract:

While the deification of ʻAli serves as a defining feature of extreme Shiʻite currents, his role within Yezidism has not yet received focused scholarly attention. Given the notable parallels between Yezidism and the heterodox Shiʻite milieu, this article seeks to explore and clarify the position of ʿAli within the Yezidi religious tradition. References to ʻAli appear multiple times in Yezidi religious texts, and in certain hymns he assumes a central role. A close examination of these sources reveals that, in contrast to extremist Shiʻism, Yezidism does not attribute divine status to ʻAli. Nonetheless, some of his functional attributes and a unique role in certain contexts suggest that he once held a particular and possibly significant position within the Yezidi tradition.

Keywords:

ʻAli, Yezidism, Extreme Shiʻism, Duldul/Dundul, Perfect Man.

The issue of Muslim and particularly Shiʻa elements in Yezidism have been addressed by scholars of the field more than once.[1] The presence of these elements in the Yezidi tradition seems odd, if only because of the ideological antagonism between Shiʻism and Yezidism, which lies, in addition to "dogmatics", in the perception of such a key figure in Islam as Yazid ibn Muʻawiya, the second Umayyad caliph. An absolutely sinister character in Shiʻism, he is not just a neutral figure in Yezidism, but is also deified, represented in the Yezidi holy triad and historically recognized as the main eponym of the community.[2] Moreover, the status of another central figure in Yezidism, Sheikh ʻAdi – whose historical lineage also traces back to the Umayyad dynasty – fur-

[1] Among such elements are numerous Muslim personalities inherited by Yezidism from its Adawiyya background – from the most iconic figures (Prophet Muhammad, Imam ʻAli, Fatima) to Sufi saints (Hussein Hallaj, Rabia Adawiya), all of them, with the exception of the Prophet Muhammad, being fully adapted by the Yezidi tradition and represented in the religious texts as Yezidi characters having nothing to do with Islam (Cf: Аракелова 2021: 157–162; *eadem* 2020: 143–146; 2001: 183–192; Asatrian 2007: 323–328; Asatrian and Arakelova 2016: 385–395; Пирбари and Мосаки 2021: 2012–227).

[2] On this character, cf. Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: Chapter 3. On the Yezidis' ethnonyms, cf. Аракелова 2006: 64–65.

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ther illustrates the consolidation of Umayyad veneration among his Sufi followers within the ʿAdawiyya order. This veneration ultimately culminated in Sheikh ʿAdi's deification within the Yezidi community, whose identity had by then undergone a significant transformation into that of the distinct Yezidi tradition. In contrast, Shiʿite doctrine regards the Umayyads as illegitimate usurpers of Islamic authority and staunch enemies of the *ahl al-bayt*, the family of the Prophet Muḥammad. These fundamental divergences would strongly suggest the absence of direct Shiʿite influence on the development of the Yezidi religious tradition.

Nevertheless, the apparent incongruity of Shiʿite elements within Yezidism becomes more comprehensible when viewed in light of a series of striking parallels between Yezidism and the extreme Shiʿa sects – and more broadly, with various strands of the Near Eastern non-dogmatic religious environment, the so called "shibboleths of heresies". I have previously explored this subject by focusing on three particularly significant elements: the idea of *tanasux* (reincarnation), the cult of the black dog, and the figure of Malak-Tawus, the Peacock Angel. Importantly, none of these parallels appear to be the result of direct or mutual influence, but rather reflect a shared symbolic and conceptual reservoir characteristic of the region's heterodox traditions[3]. Apparently, this list can be extended to include the distinctive role accorded to ʿAli ibn Abi Talib – the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph, and the first Imam in Shiʿa Islam. While Yezidism, in contrast to various heterodox Shiʿa sects, does not deify ʿAli, nor assign him an explicitly defined theological status, the Yezidi religious lore nevertheless accords him a particular and noteworthy position across several textual contexts.

Before proceeding to the Yezidi material, I would like to touch upon some of the most illustrative examples of ʿAli's deification in the extreme Shiʿa environment.

One of the most general definitions of the heterodox Shiʿa phenomenon is the concept of ʿAli-oriented communities, indicating the special status of Imam ʿAli in most of the doctrines. His veneration in the non-dogmatic Shiʿa environment has acquired an extreme character – up to the deification of this personality. According to Islamic tradition, the deification of ʿAli dates back to his life. A legend says, ʿAli himself was categorically against such a tendency contradicting the basic pillar of Islam, monotheism, and that he even ordered a group of his most avid supporters to be set on fire, to what they, already engulfed in flames, shouted: "Now we know for sure that you are God, for only

[3] Cf. Arakelova 2018b: 119–128; also: eadem 2004: 19–28.

the Almighty can punish with fire". Hence another common definition of the 'Ali-oriented communities is *ghulat* (lit. "extreme, extremist").[4]

Many of the 'Ali-oriented groups emphasize their special commitment to 'Ali by introducing his name into the Islamic creed. They supplement the classic "There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the prophet of Allah" with the phrase "Ali is the friend of Allah". However, in fact, heterodox Shi'ites approach 'Ali as someone much higher than the friend of Allah. Among the Alevis of Turkey, Muhammad and 'Ali are considered emanations of the Divine Light, but the figure of 'Ali rises even above the prophet of Islam: 'Ali is endowed with divine qualities and defined as the *bāb* – "the gate" leading to esoteric knowledge. In the Alevi tradition, god periodically manifests himself in human forms (*tecelli*) in the cyclical history of the world, but his absolute incarnation is 'Ali. 'Ali is an ultimate role model for the Alevi concept of the Perfect Man (*Insān-i Kāmil*).[5]

Irène Mélikoff writes about the perception of 'Ali as a solar deity in the remnants of ancient beliefs among the Alevis of Central Anatolia: "…He [the supreme god] can manifest himself through various cosmic phenomena: lightning, flood, earthquake, drought. But he is always far from human suffering… The heavenly gods are distant and passive. Therefore, their place is taken by deities closer to the realities of life. The sun, which is the basis of life, is closer to people… the deified sun takes the form of 'Ali, the King of people. But 'Ali, as a solar deity, appears at the last stage of a complex evolution: a long way was made between the solar deity and the god in human form, and there were many different influences".[6] The author cites, inter alia, the psalm (*nefes*) of a Qizilbash dervish:

> *It was he who created the earth, the sky, the world,*
> *The Heavenly Throne, I know no other god but 'Ali!*
>
> …I quickly realized that 'Ali was a solar deity. In the villages of Central Anatolia, he is identified with the rising sun, which is prayed to at that moment. 'Ali is symbolized by the solar animals: the lion, the crane, often identified with the phoenix, the calf.[7]

She also points to the Alevi belief in the appearance of god in human form, and in the Muslim era such a human form is 'Ali, who can also appear as a prophet or a saint.[8]

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4 On various extreme Shi'a groups and different aspects of heterodox Shi'ism cf. Moosa 1988; Olsson et al. 2005; also Аракелова 2012–2013: 12–13.

5 Cf. Zeidan 1999: 79 ff.

6 Mélikoff 2001: 90–91.

7 *Ibid*: 91.

8 Mélikoff 1922: 23.

There are certain sacred loci in Central Anatolia related to ʿAli in the Alevi tradition. One of such places is mentioned by Molyneux-Seel in his *Journey to Dersim*; he describes a high rock split in two, the upper portion of which bears a striking resemblance to a head surmounted by a fez. The Qizilbash say this is "the head of a hated Turk" cleft in two together with the rock he stood on, "by a blow from the mighty sword of Hazreti ʿAli".[9]

Another demonstrative example of Ali's deification is his status in the doctrine of the extreme Shiʿa sect Malak-Tawusis[10] (*Malak-Tāwūsihā*, i.e. followers of Malak-Tawus – the Peacock Angel), which is a branch community of the Iranian Ahl-i Haqq (*Ahl-ī Haqq*). The Malak-Tawusis inhabit the Dalahu mountains in the Kermanshah province of Iran, and have remained a notably insular and esoteric community, significantly more so than the mainstream Ahl-i Haqq. They particularly stress that ʿAli is pre-eternal, he had existed before the Creation as the Perfect (Absolute) Light (*nūr-ē muţlaq*). From his pure essence (*az jesm-ē pāk-ē ʿAli*) four angels close to the Creator, were created: Jibrail from ʿAli's right hand, Mikail from his left hand, Israil from his tongue, and, finally, Malak-Amin (i.e. Malak-Tawus), who is the absolute reincarnation of Ali (*dūn-ē ʿAli*), who now rules the world.[11]

As for the Yezidi tradition, here ʿAli is also known by the epithet "Lion of God" (*Šērē Xwadē*), paralleling the title *Asadullāh* used among the Shiʿites. This shared designation strongly suggests that both Yezidi and Muslim traditions refer to the same historical figure: ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad. Further support for this identification can be found in the Yezidi "Hymn to ʿAli, the Lion of God", (*Bayt'ā A'lī Šērē xwadē*;[12] which reinforces the reverence for his figure across both religious frameworks. The text mentions, besides ʿAli, also Fatima – the Prophet Mohammad's daughter and ʿAli's wife (Fāt, also Fātima dēm šalāla – "Fatima with the Shining Face"), the sons of ʿAli and Fatima – Hasan and Husayn (H'asan, H'usayn), Zeynab (Zīn) and Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Mohammad.

Together with the Prophet of Islam, ʿAli is also mentioned in the Yezidi requiem *Qawlē Saramargē*, in which both are represented as *terminus comparationis* in the context of the inevitability of death for all living beings:

[9] Molyneux-Seel 1914: 58.

[10] The name of the sect, in fact, coincides with one of the ethnonymic self-identifications of the Yezidis, who identify themselves, among other names, as "milatē Malak-Tāwus", i.e. the people of Malak-Tawus.

[11] Cf. Arakelova 2018a.

[12] Cf. Celil and Celil 1978: 403–412.

Řūh' čū, mā qadībī qālib,
Řāwāstīya sar ma dastakī tālib;
Avā k'āsā vaxwārīya navī Mah'madē bin A'vdila,
A'līyē bin A'būt'ālib.

The Soul has gone, an empty form remained,
The spare-hand taking away [the souls] is hung over us,
This cup was drained [even by] Prophet, Mohammad the son of Abdullah
[And] 'Ali, the son of Abutalib.[13]

An interesting detail with significant symbolic connotations in both Islamic and Yezidi contexts is the figure of Duldul (Arabic: *Duldul*, meaning "porcupine"), the she-mule – an offspring of a mare and a donkey – originally owned by the Prophet Muḥammad and later inherited by 'Ali, holding a notable place in the Shi'a tradition as a symbol of 'Ali's martial and spiritual authority.[14] Remarkably, a cognate figure appears in the Yezidi lore under the names Dundul and Dādul, suggesting a shared mythological motif that further underscores the deep, though complex, intersections between Yezidi and Islamic traditions. However, in Yezidism Dundul's owners are also Sheikh 'Adi (Šīxādī) and Sharfadin (Malak-Tawus)[15].

Šīxādī mi habū A'rabistānē,
Xudānē Dādul ū dāna.[16]

I had Sheikh 'Adi in the land of the Arabs,
[Who is] the owner of Dadul and dān (?).[17]

Šarfadīnō, xarzē gulē,
A'māmata [corrupted *a'lāmat – "sign, symbol,* embodiment"] *dastē gulē,*
Šarfadīn sīyārē Dundulē.
Šarfadīna – dīnē mina,
Šarfadīna – dīnē mina.

Sharfadin, [you are] the green of a flower,
The manifestation of a bouquet of flowers,
Sharfidin is the horseman upon Dundul,
Sharfadin is my religion,
Sharfidin is my religion.[18]

[13] Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 42.

[14] Myths and loci (hoofprints) related to Duldul are widely spread in the Muslim folklore traditions, particularly Central Asia and the North Caucasus (Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Pamirs, Adyghes, Kabardians, etc.).

[15] On Sharfadin as an epithet of Malak-Tawus, cf. Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 29–30.

[16] Celil and Celil 1978: 319.

[17] Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 41.

[18] *Ibid*.

If ʿAli himself is represented in the Yezidi tradition, why then do figures such as Sheikh ʿAdi and Sharfadin also appear mounted on the legendary beast? One might be tempted to dismiss this question, considering the absence of a rigid dogmatic structure within Yezidism. However, the complex trajectory of Duldul in Islamic tradition prevents such a simple dismissal. In Islam, the story of Duldul evolves far beyond the mere inheritance of one of the Prophet Muḥammad's possessions by his cousin and son-in-law, ʿAli ibn Abi Talib. Instead, Duldul comes to symbolize the *transfer of spiritual and temporal authority* – a motif that may be echoed in Yezidi narratives, where the mount serves as a marker of sacred legitimacy shared among several key religious figures.

Having been entrusted to ʿAli after Muhammad's death, alongside with the latter's armor and land, Duldul, in early Islamic tradition, became one of the key signs of transmission of caliphal authority. For some early Islamic theologians and hadith scholars and transmitters, the possession of Duldul by ʿAli thus had become one of the elements justifying or refuting ʿAli's right to power. Miraculous acts performed by ʿAli riding Duldul are mentioned by such Shiʿa theologians as Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022) in his *Kitab al-Irshad* ("Book of Guidance") and Sharif al-Radi (d. 1015). Sunni authors (such as, e.g. al-Dhahabi (d. 1348)), however, who would deny Ali's right to power immediately after Muhammad, doubt ʿAli's direct inheritance of Duldul, stating that the she-mule had been first gifted to Abu Bakr, who in fact succeeded to the Prophet Mohammad's political and administrative functions and thereby initiated the institute of the caliph. Ibn Abi Shaybah (d. 849) mentions that ʿAli "was the owner of the gray she-mule, like Muʿawiya", implying that the very fact of the ownership of Duldul by Muʿawiya indicates the legitimacy of the latter's and wider – the Umayyads' political power. Muʿawiya as the final owner of Duldul is also mentioned by Suhayl b. Abi Salih (d. 755).[19]

Thus, if Duldul is approached as a sign of the rightful political succession and his ownership justifies the legitimacy of power, including the Umayyads' rule, it could have penetrated into the early Adawiyya community with the same connotation. Of course, by that time (11–12 cc.), the Umayyads had no political influence, but their high religious status, sometimes bordering on worship, was still preserved in various segments of the Islamic world.[20] One of such segments was, of course, the Adawiyya Sufi order, in which the cult of its founder, Sheikh ʿAdi bin Musafir, was reinforced, in addition to the Sufi tradition of worshipping the *murshids*, also by his Umayyad origin. Later, when

[19] Cf. in detail: Marashi 2021: 643 ff.

[20] Cf. in detail: Arakelova 2005: 200–201.

the community had gradually reshaped its identity and transformed into a group with the principally new identity, alien to Islam and therefore heretical to the Muslim environment, some elements "confirming" its belonging to the dogmatic field and thus "justifying" its legitimacy and right for existence, may have been well preserved, at least on a marginal level. The Umayyad lineage of Sheikh ʻAdi bin Musafir, which had been definitely a significant aspect of his personality in the Adawiyya order, was hardly particularly emphasized later, three-four centuries after his death, already in the shaped, proper Yezidi community. But the element of the "rightful political succession" of the Umayyads and thus kind of legalization of the Yezidis as followers of Sheikh ʻAdi, could still be preserved by the community. In the lore it is reflected in the fact that Sheikh ʻAdi is the owner/master of Dadul (Duldul) – *Xudānē Dādul*. All the more, he shares it with Sharfidin/Malak-Tawus, whose cult was, most probably, less significant in the early period of the Yezidi community's formation than that of Sheikh ʻAdi, and who "receives the right" to ride Dundul (Duldul) only with the rise of his own status, when the cult of the Peacock Angel becomes central in Yezidism.

There is another important nuance to mention in this context. Despite the fact that, in the Yezidi tradition, ʻAli also rides Duldul, the above analysis proves that Sheikh ʻAdi (and, as a secondary development, Sharfadin/Malak-Tawus) did not inherited it from ʻAli.

There appear to be two distinct pathways through which the figure of Duldul may have entered Yezidi tradition. On one hand, if ʻAli is incorporated into the Yezidi worldview already identified as Duldul's historical owner, then his possession of the animal serves as a direct theological inheritance. On the other hand, Sheikh ʻAdi – venerated as the legendary founder of the Yezidi community – seems to have acquired a kind of *metaphysical* ownership of Duldul, possibly reflecting his symbolic association with the Umayyad dynasty.[21]

Finally, we approach to a principally unique niche of ʻAli in an absolutely amazing Yezidi text recorded in Armenia and dedicated to Ali's journey to hereafter. *Aʼlī Šērē Xwadē Āxiratēdā* – "Ali the Lion of God in the Hereafter",[22] in its many aspects, reminds the Zoroastrian *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* ("The Book of Righteous Wiraz").[23]

The plot develops from the moment when ʻAli gets the allowance from god to penetrate into the hereafter, together with his horse Dandul, through a grave in the grave-

[21] It is quite interesting, that the Yezidi tradition does not grant the right to ride/own Dundul to Sultan Ezid (*Silt'ān Ēzīd*), who is no less a cult figure than Sheikh ʻAdi in Yezidism, and, all the more, whose historical prototype, Yazid bin Muʻawiya, was the son of Muʻawiya bin Sufyan – owner of Duldul after ʻAli's death, according to some Muslim authors; Marashi 2021: 647.

[22] Cf. Arakelova 2025: 153–156.

[23] Cf. its publications: Gignoux 1984; Vahman 1986.

yard, in order to see the punishment of sinners with his own eyes. In the other world, ʿAli is accompanied by a young man who comments on what is happening and explains for what sin particularly each sinner suffers or is tortured. After each scene, the young man asks ʿAli to share what he saw with people, when he returns to the "unjust world", so that no one would commit similar sins.

The episodes from the text *A'lī Šērē Xwadē Āxiratēdā* give a clear idea of several sins and relevant punishments for each of them. The text highlights such sins as greed, grouchiness, licentiousness, lust, spreading gossip, eavesdropping and transmitting private information, renunciation of faith (marriage to a non-believer).

ʿAli shows his reaction, while watching the scenes of punishments. In one episode, he witnesses a woman hanging upside down from a tree, being beaten by two men. Upon observing the scene, ʿAli inquires about the reason for her punishment. A young man accompanying him responds: "She was dishonest – she was a whore". Upon hearing this, ʿAli expresses approval, reportedly saying: "Very good, then!"[24].

Leaving aside the specific details of this otherworldly journey, one is compelled to ask, why it is ʿAli – rather than another prophetic or saintly figure – who is chosen to travel to the hereafter, to witness divine retribution, and to warn the Yezidis against sin? Such a role could have been assigned to many relevant representatives of the Yezidi pantheon – starting from such authentic Yezidi figures as Davrēše A'rd,[25] the Lord of the Earth, serving as intermediary between this and the other worlds, or the psychopomp Šēx Kirās,[26] to, let us say, Sheikh ʿAdi, who presides over the judgement of souls on the Sirat bridge. Why does the Yezidi tradition entrust this mission to ʿAli? The obvious answer is that ʿAli is not deified. Unlike the deities, spirits and, all the more, members of the holy triad, who do not directly communicate with people, ʿAli does. He is a human being, although definitely a significant figure, appearing in such a notable context as the Yezidi prayer of transition, and sharing the legendary Dundul with the most sacred characters of Yezidism. He is also supposed to be the most righteous man, taking into account that in the Zoroastrian tradition, Wiraz was chosen for this mission as the most righteous among men of his time. To use a more relevant in the given context term, which reflects rather both a Sufi and extreme Shiʿa concept, than the Yezidi one, ʿAli is a Perfect Man, the one who embodies the concept of *Insān-i Kāmil* to the absolute degree.

[24] Arakelova 2025: 161–162.

[25] On this character cf. Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 87–90.

[26] Cf. *ibid*: 77–80.

In modern Yezidism, ʿAli's special niche is not particularly emphasized. However, his status of the Perfect Man and the most righteous one could well have existed in the tradition in the past.

Thus, the special status of ʿAli – whether in the form of outright deification or a unique mode of reverence – can be seen as another shibboleth of the Near Eastern non-dogmatic religious milieu. This symbolic elevation is not limited to the well-known heterodox Shiʿa groups that explicitly deify him; it also appears within the Yezidi tradition, where ʿAli emerges as a Perfect Man and the most righteous among human beings. This charismatic figure is imbued with metaphysical authority, transcending rigid sectarian boundaries and embodying moral and spiritual ideals shared across diverse religious systems.

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ვიქტორია არაქელოვა

რამდენად ახლოსაა ʻალი ღმერთთან?
ʻალის სტატუსის შესახებ ეზიდურ ტრადიციაში

აბსტრაქტი:

მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ 'ალის გაღმრთობა უკიდურესად შიიტური მიმდინარეობების განმსაზღვრელ მახასიათებელს წარმოადგენს, მის როლს ეზიდურ რელიგიაში ჯერ კიდევ არ მიქცევია ჯეროვანი სამეცნიერო ყურადღება. ეზიდიზმსა და ჰეტეროდოქსულ შიიტურ გარემოს შორის არსებული მნიშვნელოვანი პარალელების გათვალისწინებით, ეს სტატია მიზნად ისახავს ეზიდურ რელიგიურ ტრადიციაში ʻალის პოზიციის შესწავლასა და დაზუსტებას. ეზიდურ რელიგიურ ტექსტებში ʻალი მრავალჯერ გვხვდება, და გარკვეულ საგალობლებში ის ცენტრალურ როლს ასრულებს. ამ წყაროების საგულდაგულო შესწავლა ცხადყოფს, რომ რადიკალური შიიზმისგან განსხვავებით, ეზიდიზმი ʻალის ღვთაებრივ სტატუსს არ ანიჭებს. მიუხედავად ამისა, მისი ზოგიერთი ფუნქციური მახასიათებელი და გარკვეულ კონტექსტებში უნიკალური როლი მიუთითებს, რომ მას ერთ დროს განსაკუთრებული და, შესაძლოა, მნიშვნელოვანი პოზიცია ეკავა ეზიდურ ტრადიციაში.

საკვანძო სიტყვები:

ʻალი, ეზიდობა, ეზიდიზმი, რადიკალური შიიზმი, დულდულ/დუნდულ, სრულტოფილი ადამიანი.

.....

Victoria Arakelova

ʻElî çiqasî nêzîkî Xwedêye? Li ser statûsa ʻElî di kevneşopiya êzdiyanda

Kurte:

Çiqasî jî xudêkirina ʻElî taybetmendiyeke bingehî û cîgire di nav hindek rewt û tevgerên şiîʻyên radîkalda, rola wî di nav kevneşopiya dînê êzdiyanda heta niha bi awayekê taybet li ser esasê zanistî nehatîye lêkolînkirin. Berçavê ku di navbera êzdiyan û dinya şiîʻya klasîk û heterodoksda hevrêziyên balkêş hene, ev gotara pêkolê dike ku cî û statûsa ʻElî di kevneşopiya dînî ya êzdiyanda lêkolîn û ronkirinê bike. Di nivîsên dînî yên êzdiyanda gelek caran behsa ʻElî tê kirin û di hindek qewl û stranan da ew roleke navendî digire. Lêkolîna bi hûrgulî ya van çavkaniyan nîşan dike ku, li berovajî şiîʻîyetiya hişk, dînê êzdiya statûsa xudayî nade ʻElî. Bi vê yekê jî, hindek taybetmendiyên wîye fûnksiyonel (wezîfet) û rola wîye taybet di hindek çarçoveyanda destnîşan dikin, ku dibe ew di kevneşopiya dînê êzdiyanda carekê cîyekî taybet û belkî girîng girtîye.

Peyvên sereke:

ʻElî; dînê êzdiyan; şiîʻya tund; Duldul/ Dundul; mirovê temam.

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Soviet Propaganda and the Integration of the Yezidis into the Communist Society during the *Korenizatsiya* Policy (1923–1934)

Abstract:

Yezidis arrived in the South Caucasus following their migration from the Ottoman Empire. They led a traditional semi-nomadic life and preserved their culture through oral transmission, lacking a formal written tradition or education. After the establishment of the Soviet Union, the Bolsheviks intended to resolve the national question. In contrast to the Russification policy of Tsarist Russia, they granted unprecedented rights to national minorities. However, these rights needed to gain their trust and integrate them into the voluntary project of construction of a communist society. By developing propaganda tools, the Soviet authorities built a foundation for the promotion of Marxist-Leninist ideology. The process was called korenizatsiya (indigenization). This study aims to explore how Bolshevik propaganda was employed to transform the traditional lifestyle of the small Yezidi community during the korenizatsiya policy (1923–1934) so they could be integrated into a communist society. By conducting desk research and analysing both specialised literature and archival documents, the study indicates that the Soviet authorities provided the Yezidi community with opportunities to study their language and culture to publish literature and journalistic works aimed at instilling communist values and spreading ideology. Furthermore, Soviet authorities directed their propaganda at the religious and tribal leaders of the Yezidi community, using multiple various forms of art to weaken their authority and support the integration of Yezidis into the Soviet system. As a result, some aspects of the Yezidi identity, including religion and traditions, were stigmatized and portrayed as relics of the past.

Keywords:

Yezidis, USSR, Anti-religious Policy, Propaganda, *Korenizatsiya*, Intelligentsia.

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Introduction

After the establishment of the USSR, in the early 1920s, Lenin's government introduced a policy of *korenizatsiya* (literally "indigenization") as a counterweight to the Russification policy of Tsarist Russia. The latter was a set of measures aimed at assimilating ethnically non-Russian peoples of the empire. For this purpose, the Russian language, culture, and official religion were actively disseminated. The goal of this policy was to suppress the national aspirations of small communities, as well as to strengthen the unity of the Russian Empire. On the contrary, the policy of *korenizatsiya* contributed to the development of the culture and formal education of national minorities. At the initial stage, this policy did indeed encourage equality of all peoples and did not prioritize Russian culture. However, this was not an end in itself; the Bolsheviks wanted to secure the support of representatives of national minorities to build a communist society and lay the groundwork for a common socialist culture. In this way, they sought to resolve the issue of nationalism among different nations; if national minorities were indoctrinated with communist principles, their existing value systems could be modified to correspond with socialist principles. This required the formation of schools and universities, the development of literature and the printed media, cinema and theatre with a clear ideological direction and control. For this purpose, the Bolsheviks employed multiple forms of propaganda. Consequently, propaganda within the framework of the *korenizatsiya* policy did not completely suppress the identity of national minorities, but rather integrated them into the context of a new society with ideological control. Thus, the Soviet leadership set the goal not only of culturally developing minorities, but also of forming a "loyal" consciousness in the community.

The aim of this article is to identify how propaganda within the framework of the *korenizatsiya* policy integrated a traditional ethno-confessional Yezidi community into the newly formed communist society in the 1920s. The author attempted to identify the methods and forms of propaganda which were applied to the Yezidis in different spheres such as women's emancipation, education, and culture, as well as to consider which elements of the Yezidi community were targeted by Soviet propaganda and the nature of the critical discourse employed. The novelty of this article lies in its first comprehensive analysis of the Soviet propaganda towards the Yezidi community within the framework of the *korenizatsiya* policy through the lens of socio-political communication and ideological discourse. The propaganda methods used by the Soviet authorities should be viewed as a means of communication aimed at shaping and instilling ideological attitudes in the mass consciousness, which can both help and harm the community.

The methodological approach taken in this study is a mixed methodology based on the conduction of desk research and a qualitative analysis of archival documents and literature of intellectuals of a Yezidi origin (intelligentsia) of the Soviet Union. While analysing visual material (newspaper excerpts, film, and theatrical production), particular attention was paid to how images and compositions reflected the ideological tenets of the Soviet regime, gender roles, the roles of religious and tribal leaders (identifying which figures were idealized and which were portrayed as villains), as well as the place of the Yezidis in socialist society. The visual elements were viewed as elements of propaganda discourse, complementing the textual sources. All texts and archival materials used in the study were translated by the author from three languages: Kurmanji, Armenian, and Russian, into English. The texts were translated with careful attention to the original context, semantic features, ensuring an accurate interpretation of the propaganda messages.

The article examines the processes that took place mostly with the Yezidis of Soviet Armenia. Soviet Armenia has traditionally occupied a central role in scholarly and cultural activity of the Yezidis, being the place where their alphabet, the earliest books, and the first newspaper were published.

The scope of this study extends from 1923 to 1934. Later, Joseph Stalin reversed the policy of *korenizatsiya* and elevated the Russian nation to the rank of "first among equals." This shift also affected the Yezidis, and the present study lays the groundwork for further research on the means of propaganda applied to the Yezidis under successive Soviet leaders and in the post-Soviet period.

There are certain limitations to this study. First of all, it concerns the use of the terminology Yezidi, Kurd, Kurd-Yezidi (or Yezidi Kurd). When Joseph Stalin came to power in 1924, he established the ethnolinguistic policy, the aim of which was to reduce the number of nations[1] in the country.[2] Thus, Soviet authorities grouped Muslim Kurds and Yezidis under a single umbrella-term, categorizing them as one national entity. They were guided by the fact that both communities spoke Kurmanji.[3] Consequently,

[1] Soviet authorities used several terms regarding national and ethnic classifications, which differed from European or Western understanding. For example, the term "nation" in the Soviet Union (and later in Russian and other post-Soviet contexts) did not mean a nation-state as in European culture, but rather an ethnic group. Similarly, "nationality" (национальность) referred not to citizenship but to an ethnic origin.

[2] Cf. Ali *et al*. 2021: 8.

[3] In this study, the term Kurmanji is used to denote the northern branch of the Kurdish language complex. This usage is corroborated by modern linguistic glosses. Descriptive studies distinguish Kurmanji as an independent entity (see Haig 2018); a detailed classification of its internal dialects is offered by Öpengin & Haig (2014), and reference works emphasize the incomplete mutual intelligibility between Kurmanji and Sorani (see Thackston 2006, Preface). For this reason, the author does not use the term Kurdish language. Please note, the Yezidi community in the former Soviet Union is linguistically divided: some members refer to their language as Kurdish, while others call it Ezdiki. The author considers the term Kurmanji to be less politicized and academically justified.

in most archival publications (books, newspapers, articles, etc.) on Yezidis from the Soviet era, their nationality is noted as Kurdish, which may also refer to Muslim Kurds. It is also noteworthy to mention that alongside the nationalities Yezidi, Kurd-Yezidi, or Kurd, there existed a more consolidated form of self-identity inherent to the inhabitants living in the territory of Sarhad[4] – Kurmanj.[5] A striking example of this is Arab Shamilov's book *Kurdish Shepherd (Şivanê Kurmanca)*, which was never translated into Russian as *Kurmanj Shepherd*. In light of this, if the archival documents indicate the Kurdish language, the author changes it to Kurmanji. If the documents use the word Kurdish in relation to certain institutions, the author leaves it the same, since they could also refer to Muslim Kurds (for example, Kurdish schools). The study uses direct quotes that the author does not change.

Of particular significance is the fact that some publications, particularly books and the *Ria Taza* newspaper, published in the Latin alphabet, were destroyed during the Soviet repressions. For this reason, early issues of the newspaper are currently inaccessible in online archives. However, the author was able to examine one of the *Ria Taza* issues in the Latin alphabet through access to a private collection of the writer Hajie Jndi.

It should be emphasized that the author received the archival documents in the reading room of the National Archives of the Republic of Armenia in 2021. At present, due to the author's location outside the country, it is impossible to clarify the archival collection (фонд) (except for *Ria Taza* newspaper), the series (опись), and file numbers (дело). However, the digital version of the documents is stored in the researcher's personal archive.

The article is structured into three main sections. The first part examines the policy of *korenizatsiya* as a framework for integrating national minorities into the Soviet system. Particular attention is paid to the educational and women's emancipation policies which provide the necessary context for understanding the mechanisms of Soviet influence on national minorities. They allow one to consider propaganda not in isolation, but as part of a broader system of ideological practices in which gender equality and educational policy served as the foundation for the formation of Soviet cultural identity. The second section explores the targets of Soviet propaganda, focusing on how ideology was adapted to the specific context of the Yezidi community. The third part analyses cultural production (literature, cinema, theatre, and the printed media) as key instruments through which Soviet values were disseminated and normalized. It should

[4] A territory covering the Kars region, Van vilayet, Bayazid sanjak, and Alashkert.

[5] Literally a person or an ethnic group, who speaks Kurmanji. The absolute majority of Yezidis and Muslim Kurds living in the Caucasus and Sarhad region are traditionally Kurmanji-speakers.

be noted that literature served as the main instrument for disseminating Soviet narratives about the Yezidi community, while films and theatrical productions were rare due to the high costs and labour involved in their production.

National Policy of Korenizatsiya: New Socialist Identity

The national question remained a pivotal focus for the Bolsheviks following their rise to power. They acknowledged that Tsarist Russia's policy of forced Russification had proven ineffective and demanded a different course of action. Bolshevik support was coming primarily from Central Russia; in all other regions, they were supported either by Russians or Russified workers.[6] In this regard, it was essential to attract other ethnic groups to the Communist Party. They deliberately involved locals in the governing bodies for each region, as they knew the life and customs of their community. In addition, they issued laws in minority languages. Accordingly, the Bolsheviks sought to position themselves as the party which fought the policy of forced Russification:

> Only by fighting Great Russian chauvinism can we ensure the strength of the union and the influence of the party among the working masses of other countries.[7]

One of the central aims of this process was the formation of a common socialist culture that would unite numerous peoples through values based on communist ideology. It is noteworthy that Stalin defined minority cultures as "national in form, but socialist in content".[8] This implied that the distinctive national identity of the non-Russian population was to coexist with the emerging socialist culture and be promoted only in the socio-economic sphere. By promoting the cultures of non-Russian peoples through the dissemination of folklore, national songs and dances, literature, the Bolsheviks aimed to depoliticize their national identities.[9] Education, language, and culture served as mechanisms of governance for the deliberate formation of new socialist identity.[10] To this end, it was essential to demonstrate the successes of the economic and social revolution as the formation of collective farms (kolkhoz), dispossession of the kulaks (dekulakization),[11] industrialization, the opening of schools and theatres in national lan-

6 Cf. Smith 1996: 177.

7 Institute of Marxism–Leninism under the Central Committee of the CPSU 1983: 53.

8 Martin 2001: 74.

9 See *ibid*: 75.

10 Cf. Hirsch 2005: 199.

11 Dekulakization was part of broader collectivization policy (1928–1937), which was the process of forced unification of peasant farms into kolkhoz. The goal of collectivization was the liquidation of private land ownership and the creation of large agricultural enterprises. During this period, the Bolsheviks liquidated the kulaks as a social class.

guages, and so on. Thus, socialist identity was to be defined through work and culture (dance, folklore), and not through religion or traditions.[12]

Particular attention should be paid to Bolshevik gender policy in this period. The Soviet government regarded the emancipation of women as a key instrument for destroying "the old order", as women in traditional societies were perceived as the main bearers of customs and religion. In this context, women's "liberation" became not only a social but also an ideological goal–a tool for rebuilding traditional society along Soviet lines.[13] Thus, the Soviet authorities aimed to eliminate the "backwardness" of Eastern women[14] and integrate them into the socialist system. However, the rights and opportunities granted to women were implemented strictly within certain limits. The Bolsheviks were afraid of rising feminism, as it could lead to the exclusion of female workers from the general class struggle.[15] To prevent this, the Bolsheviks set themselves a task of training female instructors in accordance with socialist values. Thus, the Women's department of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (CC) was supposed to involve women from the East in the construction of communism. One of the markers of this policy implementation was the inclusion of minority women in leadership positions who would promote communist ideas within the community. As an example, an instructor at the Women's Department a Yezidi Nure Polatova[16] declared:

> The time is approaching when Yezidi women will no longer be represented only by isolated individuals in our ranks. They will overcome their intellectual stagnation.[17]

At the conference that brought together Yezidi women, Polatova had lectures on such topics as "What Soviet Life Gave to Women", "Women Under the Communist System", "The Position of Women in the Past, Present, and Future", etc.

In accordance with the propaganda manual, Yezidi authors highlighted in their publications the oppressed role of Yezidi women before the October Revolution. They often mentioned the difficult conditions in which Yezidi women had lived. For example, the women had had no access to healthcare during illness or childbirth, so they often lost their babies or suffered complications.[18] In the book "Culture of the Kurds of Soviet Armenia", the practice of polygamy was discussed, noting that wealthy begs and aghas

[12] Cf. Hirsch 2005: 200.

[13] Cf. Northrop 2001: 193.

[14] During this period, the Bolsheviks introduced a campaign to liberate women of the East: women of the Volga region, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

[15] Institute of Marxism–Leninism under the Central Committee of the CPSU 1984: 125.

[16] Nure Polatova was a sister of a Bolshevik revolutionary Fyodor Lytkin, known as Ferik Polatbekov among the Yezidis.

[17] Chatoev 1965: 60.

[18] Cf. Avdal 1960: 179.

could have up to five wives, whereas men from average households had one or two.[19] Moreover, it pointed out that a Yezidi man saw a woman in the house as a speechless creature; it was perfectly shown in a proverb "Men lengthened their tongue at women" ("*Zimanê mêr ser jinê dirêj bû*"), i.e., men had a right to speak freely and authoritatively, while women should have obeyed and not to reply.[20] In contrast, Yezidi authors paid particular attention to women's achievements and positive changes following the establishment of Soviet power. In particular, they highlighted that polygamy was officially abolished, some Yezidi women were awarded the honorary title "Mother Heroine", received education and were elected as deputies.[21] In 1929, a chairperson of the Karvansere[22] village council Susika Khudo declared:

> I feel like I am in my family here, like an equal among equals. We, the Kurds, live prosperously and culturally. Now our girls are not sold for a bride price (…). We owe all this to the Soviet power. I take off my headdress – a symbol of centuries-old backwardness, fettering my thoughts and will!.[23]

These were success stories documented by intelligentsia in books and newspapers as part of the propaganda, while in practice women faced significant challenges.[24] For some women, access to education was particularly difficult. For example, a daughter of Beg Omar Agha Ozman, Gyavaz Ozman introduced herself as Mariam Saroyan, because of the social status of her father.[25] As a consequence, she was bullied both by her neighbours in the village and her Yezidi classmates.[26] In addition, the polygamy practice was still rarely observed up to the late 1960s. At that time, it occurred not because of wealth, but rather when the first wife was unable to give birth to a son. Accordingly, in some cases wives themselves would bring a new wife to their husbands in the hope that the family line would be continued by a son. These wives referred to themselves as "co-wife" ("hewî") and lived in the same household. Thus, this practice reflected a gender-biased social structure, as a woman's consent to a second wife was often the result of pressure within the community.

It should be highlighted, that the 12th Congress of the Bolshevik Party, held in April 1923, described detailed propaganda methods for achieving educational goals. The Bol-

[19] Cf. *ibid*.

[20] Cf. *ibid*.

[21] Cf. Jndi 1954: 9.

[22] Karvansere or Emirê Teze, now Sadunts village in Aragatsotn Province, Armenia.

[23] Chatoev 1965: 61.

[24] It should be noted that women belonging to national minorities often face a dual challenge, encountering discrimination not only in wider society but also within their communities, where traditions are strictly maintained.

[25] Further details are provided in the next chapter.

[26] Cf. Pobedonostseva Kaya 2024: 72.

sheviks set the task of increasing the educational qualifications of peoples in accordance with Marxist ideology. Thus, schools were to be available in all villages and cities. Moreover, they sought to reinforce party-controlled publishing and educational institutions such as party schools and communist universities to develop a proletarian intelligentsia.[27] The Bolsheviks realized that the elimination of illiteracy meant better control over culture and education. Moreover, the most effective way to create a new Soviet identity was to ensure access to an ideologically oriented education system. Thus, according to the Decree on the Elimination of Illiteracy, all illiterate people between the ages of 8 and 50 were required to receive an education.[28] Consequently, there were literacy centres operating in the Yezidi villages of Soviet Armenia: Hakko, Gyalto, Tlik, Sorrik, Kyalashbek, Sichanlu, Baysiz, Dian, Bolshoy Dzhamushlu, Mirak, Djarjaris, Karvansere, etc.[29]

On April 23, 1921, the People's Commissariat of Education issued a decree, according to which, the Yezidis would be taught to read and write in their native language. In October 1921, a textbook with the Kurmanji alphabet, known as Shams, was published by an Armenian, Hakob Ter-Kazaryan (Lazo). It was based on the Armenian script and consisted of two sections: a primer and a book for reading. In the preface to the textbook, Lazo wrote:

> The efforts of the Soviet Armenia government have made the creation of a primer for the Kurds possible today. The People's Commissariat of Education of the Armenian SSR entrusted me with this task and did not shrink from any difficulties, so that in the near future we could accomplish what had for decades remained merely a subject of discussions.[30]

[27] Institute of Marxism–Leninism under the Central Committee of the CPSU 1984: 55.
[28] See Decree of 26 December 1919 on the Elimination of Illiteracy among the Population of the R.S.F.S.R. (1943).
[29] Cf. Chatoev 1965: 107.
[30] National Archives of Armenia. Fond 1407, Marking the 60th Anniversary of the textbook Shams [Unpublished archival material]. Inventory and case are not identified.



Kurmanji alphabet *Shams* made by Lazo, which was based on the Armenian script.

However, this alphabet did not correspond to the phonetic features of Kurmanji. Moreover, the Muslim Kurds, living mainly in Azerbaijan and abroad, could not understand it. Thus, on March 25, 1925, the People's Commissariat of Education of Soviet Armenia approved the new Kurmanji alphabet based on the Latin script. At the end of 1928, a public figure and member of the Communist Party Arab Shamilov and a linguist Isaac Marogulov, who was of an Assyrian origin, published a new alphabet for Kurmanji.

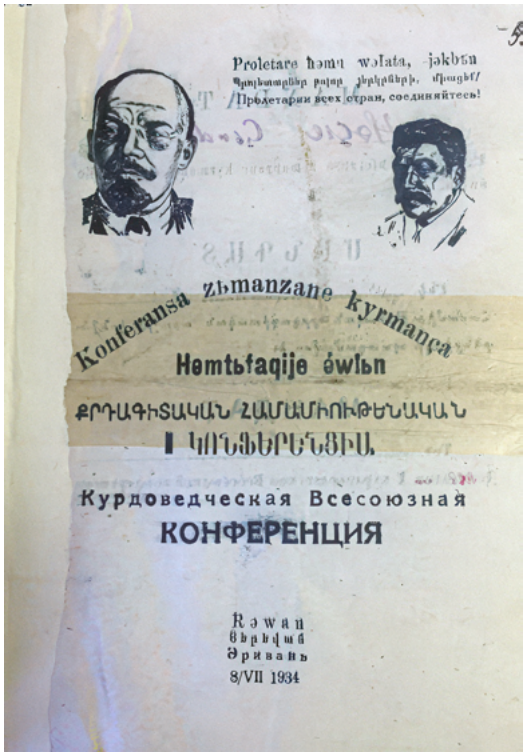
Consequently, in 1930, there were 27 Kurdish schools with 1,451 students in Soviet Armenia.[31] It should be noted that school textbooks were also published in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.[32] Upon the establishment of Kurdish schools, Yusuf Kamil Bey Bedirkhan expressed his deep admiration for the Soviet Union. His statement was quickly appropriated by Soviet media and was subsequently reproduced both in the *Ria Taza* newspaper and in school textbooks, serving as an illustration of loyalty to Soviet educational policy:

[31] Cf. Chatoev 1965: 122.

[32] National Archives of Armenia. Fond 1407, *Marking the 50th Anniversary of the New Kurdish Alphabet* [Unpublished archival material]. Inventory and case are not identified.

> The Soviet system, perhaps, has given no other people such irreplaceable historical blessings as to the Kurdish people. It developed a language for our children; it healed the blindness of our thoughts; it lit the torch of our civilization; it gave us the means and the opportunity to join the ranks of civilized nations. (…) From now on, the Kurdish nation will not die. Glory to Soviet power, which raised the torch of civilization.[33]

The shift to compulsory primary education contributed to the preparation of qualified teachers. In this regard, a group of eleven individuals, identified as Yezidis and possibly including Muslim Kurds, were sent to the Leningrad Oriental Institute to become qualified teachers. However, this was not enough, and, in January 1931, the People's Commissar of Education of Soviet Armenia A. Mravyan founded the Transcaucasian Kurdish Technical Institute in Yerevan. The first director of the institute was Arab Shamilov. During the 6 years of its existence, the school trained 70 new teachers of Kurmanji. In 1937, during the Great Terror, the institute was closed.



Booklet of the All-Union Kurdish Studies Conference of 1934. Source: Hajie Jndi's private archive

In July 1934, the first All-Union Kurdish Studies Conference was held in Yerevan. The conference discussed such issues as "The October Revolution and National-Cultural Construction Among the Kurmanji Workers", "The Problem of a Common Cultural Language", "Formation of socialism among the Kurmanjis before the October Revolution", "The Fundamentals of Kurmanji Grammar", etc.

[33] *Idem.*



Participants of the first All-Union Kurdish Studies Conference. Source: Hajie Jndi's private archive

Within the Bolshevik propaganda, an anti-religious policy occupies a distinctive place. The Bolsheviks believed that anti-religious propaganda could not be successfully implemented until the issue of illiteracy of the population was finally resolved.[34] Accordingly, control over education was closely linked to anti-religious policy. Interestingly, the Bolsheviks realised that mockery of objects of faith would not lead to results. Instead, they agreed on propaganda aimed at exposing of the connection of religious groups with the interests of the bourgeoisie, landowners, capitalists, or religious elites.[35] Thus, they sought to replace "the outdated remnants" of religious ideas with clear scientifically grounded perspectives on both nature and social life.[36] To this end, the Bolsheviks took steps to organize anti-religious interest groups and publish special literature in minority languages. Obviously, they gave serious consideration to this issue, as they suggested preparing lively and understandable lectures involving natural scientists and materialists.[37] To illustrate, a candidate of historical sciences[38], orientalist

[34] Institute of Marxism–Leninism under the Central Committee of the CPSU 1984: 125.
[35] Cf. *ibid*: 114.
[36] Cf. *ibid*.
[37] Cf. *ibid*.
[38] Soviet terminology of PhD in History.

Tatyana Aristova wrote that Yezidi religious holidays were harmful to health and under this pretext they needed to abandon them:

> Traditional religious holidays, such as Fast days of Ezid Festival (Rojiyên Êzdî), Fast days of Khidir Nabi Festival (Rojiyên Xidir Nebî), or Festival of Khidir Nabi (Eyda Xidir Nebî) cause enormous harm to public health. Kurdish families fast for three to thirty days. (…) Young Kurdish women and even children often take part in observing the fast.[39]

She suggested the local intelligentsia conduct explanatory work with the community, as administrative fines could push people away from the ideology of communism. In general, she believed that religious holidays were celebrated out of habit, and not because of religious beliefs.[40]

Thus, the process of establishing a socialist identity evolved from a mere bureaucratic formality into a method of shaping mass consciousness.[41] Education, language policy, the formation of national schools, and gender equality were not simply manifestations of cultural diversity, but instruments for integrating minorities into the Soviet ideological space. The 12th Bolshevik Congress demonstrated that *korenizatsiya* was aimed to make Soviet power acceptable and understandable to the minorities, encouraging them to perceive the Soviet power as their own achievement.[42]

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Yezidis were largely illiterate and lacked a written literary tradition. Therefore, the creation of schools and the development of an alphabet were not acts of mercy, but rather a deliberate political strategy aimed at cultivating a loyal citizenry. The authorities had to first teach people literacy before proceeding to the ideologically restructuring their consciousness. Thus, they established an alphabet and special institute to train teachers for Kurdish schools and opened educational institutions in rural areas. Moreover, when examining works describing the difficulties women faced before the establishment of Soviet power, it's not always obvious that such texts were part of a broader propaganda framework. Without understanding how the Soviet regime interpreted and utilized the concept of gender equality, these texts can be perceived merely as narratives of social progress, rather than as ideological constructs. The true aim of these apparently well-intentioned measures was to instil the communist ideology into the consciousness of the masses, to shape a mindset oriented toward loyalty to the regime, and practically to eliminate the possibility of critical thought.

[39] National Archives of Armenia. Fond 1407, *On the Issue of Religious Vestiges in Kurdish Families* [Unpublished archival material]. Inventory and case are not identified.

[40] Cf. *ibid*.

[41] Cf. Hirsch 2005: 145.

[42] Cf. Martin 2001: 74.

Religious and Tribal Leaders as Targets of Soviet Propaganda

The Yezidis migrated to the South Caucasus in tribal groups, each led by an agha or beg. They held authority among the common people and had power over them. Furthermore, as in classic feudalism, begs or aghas were involved in decision-making processes. In addition to their role as rulers, they also acted as guardians of customary law, thus combining the powers of governance and judicial authority. This was certainly true in the case of such disputes as the kidnapping of girls, the division of property, etc.[43] Notably, the more peasants begs had, the stronger their economic power and military strength was.

Besides protecting their tribe, begs or aghas collected income from each family of the tribe and held control over their property.[44] Arab Shamilov describes the beg's possessions in detail. Since the beg had summer and winter pastures, a nomad paid him the so-called "per head of cattle" ("*çop başî*").[45] Accordingly, the members of the tribe paid tribute to the beg for using the pastures.

Naturally, such power could not coexist in Soviet society, where the Bolsheviks eliminated social groups of wealthy classes. Soon, they elevated many begs and aghas into kulaks[46] as part of the collectivization policy and repressed them. The most famous examples are the arrests of Usub Beg and Jangir Agha, most honoured authorities among the Yezidis of Sarhad.

Usub Beg was the leader of the Haseni tribe. According to archival materials, he received education in Echmiadzin in 1883 at the age of 16. Usub Beg and his tribe (according to various estimates, his tribe numbered 20,000 people) left the Surmalu Uyezd[47] in 1918, when the Russians retreated from the conquered territories, and Turkish troops invaded. They settled in the village of Shamiram, which was located in the territory of modern Armenia.

Alongside his authority, Usub Beg supported the Dashnaktsutyun party (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) that came to power in Armenia in 1918. Later, Usub Beg represented the Yezidis in the Armenian parliament (Khorhurd). Two years later, the Dashnaktsutyun party actively fought against the Bolsheviks, however the latter succeed in the establishment of Soviet power in Armenia. Usub Beg then fled to Iran with dozens of the Dashnaktsutyun party members and returned to Armenia only in 1921. Enjoying great authority among the Yezidis and having connections with the Dashnaks, Usub

[43] Cf. Pirbari 2008: 37.

[44] Cf. *ibid*: 33.

[45] Cf. Shamilov 1932: 35.

[46] A wealthy peasant who was seen as a class enemy by the Bolsheviks.

[47] One of the uyezds (municipalities) within the Erivan Governorate of the Russian Empire.

Beg posed a threat to the new government. Thus, he was arrested in 1929 on charges of spreading alleged counterrevolutionary ideas.

Another leader was Jangir Agha, head of the Zukri tribe. Jangir Agha migrated from the Chibukhli village of Van vilayet of the Ottoman Empire, where he resided. He is considered a national hero among the Yezidis of Sarhad. Like Usub Beg, Jangir Agha supported the Dashnak government. In 1938, he was arrested on charges of counter-revolutionary activity.

Consequently, the Soviet authorities saw both Usub Beg and Jangir Agha as enemies of the regime as they held authoritative positions in the Yezidi community and had been associated in the past with the Dashnaktsutyun party. They were leaders of their tribes, which counted tens of thousands of people, and their influence allowed them to discourage the Yezidis from embracing Soviet power.

The second social institution of the Yezidis that needed to be fought was the clergy. The Yezidi formation is a theocratic community, which means that their life is closely connected to religion. D. Pirbari believes that "Yezidism is a national religion", that is, not just a religious and philosophical teaching, but also an integral part of ethnic identity.[48] Accordingly, a special place in the life of each Yezidi is occupied by clergymen – Sheikhs and Pirs. Every Yezidi has their Sheikh and Pir. The primary function of a Sheikh is to serve as a spiritual guide for his followers, who show him respect and, to a certain degree, obedience.[49] For many Yezidis, respecting a living Sheikh is equivalent to paying homage to the holy eponym of their family.[50] Hence, they perform religious rites such as weddings, first hair cutting (bisk), funerals, etc. and ensure their followers comply with the religious precepts. Followers often contributed the charity in name of the deceased (*xêra miriya*) to Sheiks and Pirs, which was perceived by Soviet authorities as negative practice.

In addition, one must mention the structure of the community's religious centre. The religious centre of the Yezidis is Lalish, currently located in the Yezidi region of Walat Sheikh, within the Kurdish-controlled Nineveh Plains of Iraq. The Yezidis are under the rule of a mir, a figure with both secular and religious functions. He is the head of the Supreme Spiritual Council of the Yezidis (head of the Yezidis of the whole world). The mir annually sends Qawwals to the Yezidi-populated areas to preach and spread the religion.[51] Interestingly, Qawwals visited even the newly formed Soviet Union. It was

[48] Cf. Pirbari and Shchedrovitsky 2016: 13.

[49] Cf. Kreyenbroek 1995: 130.

[50] Cf. *ibid*.

[51] Cf. Nicolaus 2024: 84.

possible until their visits were considered hostile by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s. In the mid-20th century, the Kurdish (Kurmanji) edition of Yerevan Radio received a letter from Lalish inquiring about a Qawwal who had gone to Armenia before the Bolshevik Revolution and never returned. As he was a cleric, the journalists did not reply.[52] This indicates that the Yezidis sustained their connection with the Supreme Spiritual Council despite geographical separation and only state-level restrictions limited their communication.

To conclude, lacking their own nation-state, the Yezidis were bound by laws and norms dictated by their religious and tribal leaders. Religious holidays and traditions had always played an essential role in the community life and held a high esteem. Thus, to advance their economic, educational, and cultural agenda, the Soviet authorities sought to weaken the authority of religious and tribal leaders. The article further analyses the educational and cultural programs that enabled the Yezidis to gain access to education and foster the development of their language and literature as well as the use of art as a means of propaganda directed against the Yezidi clergy and tribal leaders.

Propaganda in Literature, Film, Theatre, and the Newspaper Ria Taza

At the 12th Congress, the Bolsheviks agreed on the implying literature, theatre, and cinema as instruments of their propaganda. In this regard, one should recall Lenin's well-known statement:

> While our people are illiterate, the most important forms of art for us are cinema and circus.[53]

According to them, the heroic sided of the communist struggle against ideology enemies must have been emphasized.[54] Moreover, art was to play a major role in the fight against religion.

In 1926, the famous Armenian director Hamo Beknazarov made the film *Zare*. The story was based on the eponymous story written by Lazo. The movie portrays an unbreakable love between Yezidi young people – Zare and Saido, and injustice that was encouraged by the previous regime. The plot centres on a village near Mount Alagyaz in the early 20th century. The shepherd Saido is in love with Zare and dreams of marrying her. Temur-beg, who is married and has recently had a child, wants to have Zare as his second wife. At this time, the Tsarist government intends to have a volunteer troop

[52] Cf. Sardar 2013.

[53] Stolyarova 2017.

[54] Institute of Marxism–Leninism under the Central Committee of the CPSU 1984: 111.

of Kurds to send to war. Temur-beg and the Sheikh bribe the government representatives to decide who to send to war. Thus, the poor are sent, and the rich are not. Later, they take bribes from some of the villagers to withdraw their names from the volunteer list. Temur-beg deliberately includes Saido in the list. At the time, when the men went to war, the beg kidnaps Zare. When Zare's family turns to the sheikh to help them get the girl back, he asks for a bribe. However, it does not help, as the beg does not agree to return Zare. On the contrary, he wants to send the bride price to her father. At the wedding, Zare rejects Temur-beg and slaps him. In a rage, he announces to everyone that the girl is not "innocent". So, the guests begin to spit on her face. Fortunately, Saido, who earlier escaped from the military troop, runs up and saves Zare.



One of the first posters for Zare. Source: Zagros Film Festival

As Armenian film scholar Karen Kalantar writes, the movie *Zare* depicts the real East – exploiters and exploited.

> The central aspect of Zare lies in its painfully unadorned depiction of the people's life, presented for the first time in the history of global cinema. [55]

Thus, Beknazarov made the Tsarist regime, the Yezidi clergy and nobility the villains. The film aimed to illustrate the exploitation of power by the corrupt beg and Sheikh and the resulting injustice toward ordinary people. Interestingly, Beknazarov mentioned in his memoirs that Stalin, after watching "Zare", said that only the Armenians should have produced films about the lives of Eastern people.[56]

The second film dedicated to the life of the Yezidis is the film *Kurds-Yezidis* directed by Amasi Martirosyan. It was released in 1932. The movie portrays the hardships faced by ordinary Yezidis, who are deceived by Yezidi nobility and clergy. It also highlights the difficult life of Yezidi women, who are simultaneously engaged in household chores,

[55] Kalantar 1973: 48.

[56] Cf. Bakhchinyan 2015: 108.

childcare, and cattle breeding. Lack of access to education and healthcare made Yezidis believe in various superstitions told by the Sheikh, but everything changes with the establishment of Soviet power in the country. A doctor and a female teacher visit the village and improve life in the village with their knowledge. The main villain, Sheikh, does not like it and forbids Yezidis from studying and having medical evaluations. In the end, the peasants limit the Sheikh's authority by establishing a kolkhoz, where men and women worked on equal conditions. In addition to the main antagonist, the Sheikh, the film prominently highlights the issue of gender inequality, portraying its resolution as a consequence of the socialist revolution.



Kurdish theatre in the 1940s. Source: Hajie Jndi's private archive.

Thus, it is evident that early films about the Yezidis vividly reflected the Soviet authorities' rejection of religious and tribal leaders. They portrayed them as evil, hypocritical antagonists who obstructed social progress.

The same themes formed the main repertoire of a traveling Kurdish theatre which was organized in the Aparan region in the 1930s. The performers were Yezidis/Kurds from Yerevan, Tbilisi, and other cities. The plays "Sunrise" and "Daughter of Mirak"

showed life on kolkhoz and the struggle of the Yezidis against the begs and Sheikhs during the Civil War.[57]

The first book that was published in Kurmanji (with a Latin base) was the book by Arab Shamilov and a linguist Isaac Marogulov Self-study Guide to Kurmanji for Adults. The book reflected themes and examples related to communism. For example, the section on important days highlighted days such as the dates of the February and October Revolutions, the day of Lenin's death, World Workers' Day, and the day of the unification of the USSR.

Shamilov also worked as a translator. The books "The Life of Lenin", "The History of the October Revolution", etc. were issued in Kurmanji.

In the 1930s, Shamilov published his autobiographical book, The Kurdish Shepherd. He described his family's hard life, the loss of loved ones, his early education and work in a Cossack regiment during the First World War, and the injustice that prompted him to support the Bolsheviks:

> The whole life of a Kurdish shepherd boy was filled with labour and the painful concern of how to appease hunger. However, in the spring of 1917, a turning point occurred in me: a piece of bread stopped being the main and only purpose of my existence (…). I joined the Party.[58]

In Shamilov's first play, "Koçekê Perevîn" ("False Prophet"), which was published in 1931, the author spoke out against religious customs. In Kurds of *Alagyaz* he portrayed the begs, aghas, and Yezidi clergy as the main antagonists, resisting the establishment of Soviet authority in the villages. The young communist Misto, a former shepherd, fought against the power of tribal leaders, in particular, Usub Beg and Jangir Agha. He claimed:

> Our first enemy are the begs, agalars, Sheikhs, and mullahs, and the second one is nomadic migration (…) We must destroy our old traditions and not listen to the Sheikhs, who always say: "Obey your elders, the begs." (…) If anyone says anything against a Sheikh, Pir or mullah, the beg will flog him with rods.[59]

As a result, the heroes established a kolkhoz and joined the Komsomol[60]. In addition, the story addressed the issues of bride price, child marriage, and polygamy. Most importantly, it illustrated a transition of the Yezidis from a semi-nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle. In fact, this issue was deemed essential for the Soviet authorities, as the

[57] National Archives of Armenia. Fond 1407, *The Opening of the State Kurdish Touring Theatre* [Unpublished archival material]. Inventory and case are not identified.

[58] Shamilov 1931.

[59] *Idem* 1935.

[60] Officially, "All-Union Leninist Young Communist League" – a Soviet political youth organization.

successful functioning of kolkhoz presupposed the settlement of nomadic communities. According to Hajie Jndi, the transition from nomadic life to the kolkhoz represented a profound and unprecedented shift, almost unimaginable at that time.[61]

It is worthwhile to analyse Shamilov's article "On the Issue of Feudalism Among the Kurds" (1936). He challenged theses of "bourgeois" historians who insisted that the Kurds were a democratic community, where everyone, regardless of their standard of living, had equal rights.[62] Shamilov noted that feudalism undermined the economic basis of clan society and reshaped religion and traditions ("remnants of the past") to serve the interests of class domination. He also highlighted that feudal lords enriched themselves by extracting "legal" incomes taken from peasants.[63] For example, during holidays or a misfortune the peasants should have brought some gifts.[64]



Self-study Guide to Kurmanji for Adults.

In 1931, writers Hajie Jndi and Amine Avdal translated Lazo's book *About Jasim*.[65] It portrayed the journey of a young man, the son of a shepherd, who took part in the revolution. Later, he became a fighter for the Soviets. In addition, Hajie Jndi translated the work of the Armenian writer Hrachya Kochar *Khadje*. The story depicted Yezidi nomads who, under the influence of Armenian educated young people, adopted a sedentary lifestyle. A young girl, Khadje, despite all difficulties, succeeded in obtaining an education.

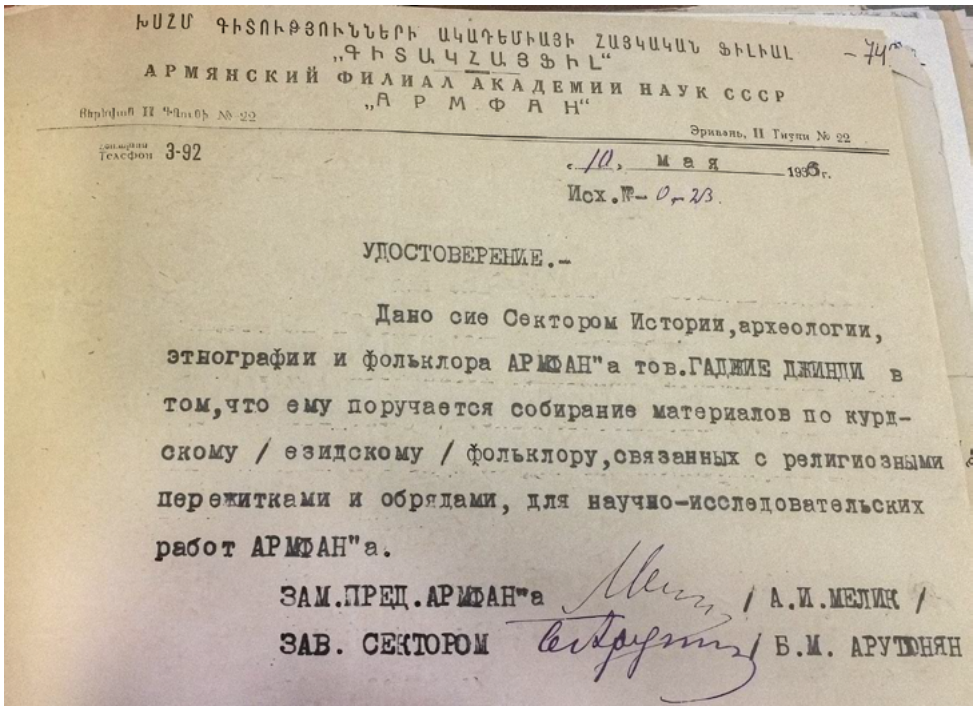
[61] Cf. Jndi 1954: 7.

[62] Cf. Shamilov 1936: 12.

[63] Cf. *ibid*: 44.

[64] Cf. *ibid*.

[65] National Archives of Armenia. Fond 1407, *On the 70th Anniversary of the Birth of Professor H. J. Djawari* [Unpublished archival material]. Inventory and case are not identified.



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Телефон 3-92
Эривань, II Типо № 22
«10» мая 1936 г.
Исх. № 0-23

УДОСТОВЕРЕНИЕ.-

Дано сие Сектором Истории, археологии, этнографии и фольклора АРМФАН"а тов. ГАДЖИЕ ДЖИНДИ в том, что ему поручается собирание материалов по курдскому / езидскому / фольклору, связанных с религиозными пережитками и обрядами, для научно-исследовательских работ АРМФАН"а.

ЗАМ. ПРЕД. АРМФАН"а / А.И. МЕЛИК /
ЗАВ. СЕКТОРОМ / Б.М. АРУТЮНЯН

A document stating that the Hajie Jndi was to collect materials on Kurdish/Yezidi folklore related to remnants of past religious life and rituals. 1936 Source: Hajie Jndi's private archive

Notably, in folk singing, there were works that glorified Soviet leaders and condemned religious and tribal authorities.

Hezar hêştsed heftê salê Şêrîn Lenîn	In eighteen seventy, dear Lenin was born.
Hatiye dinê. Dinê xemilî, gul ketine,	He brightened our life, blossoms bestrewed.
Miletê Kurd da xwendinê.	He brought education to the Kurdish people.
Dewra berê belengazbûn	In the past, we lived in poverty,
Lenîn rabû, em xelasbûn,	Lenin rose up and freed us.
Navê Lenîn şêrîn şabû	The name of Lenin became sweet at night,
Ilmê Marks xwendin dabû.[66]	He brought Marxism to us to study,
	Opened the path of education.

[66] Sîmo c. 1960s.

Another example is a song *Наве Ленин* published in 1973[67], in *Ria Taza* with lyrics by Bemale Keko and musical notes by Jamila Jalil:

Ленин жь Р'усетере р'абу,
Щьмаэ'те ма һэвр'а ша бу,
Щьмаэ'те ма һэвр'а ша бу,
Эм жь дэсте зөлмк'ара хъласбун.
Эм жь дэсте зөлмк'ара хъласбун.

Lenin rose in Russia.
Our people were filled with joy.
We were liberated from the hands of the oppressors.

Наве Ленин навэки мэзьнэ,
Азаий да дьниайе, мер у жьнэ,
Азаий да дьниайе, мер у жьнэ,
Wэки дьнйа сал бъ сал бъхэмьлэ
Wэки дьнйа сал бъ сал бъхэмьлэ

The name of Lenin is a distinguished one.
He granted liberty to the world, to both men and women,
Making the world more prosperous year by year.

Эм жь ве дэwре зэ'ф р'азинэ,
Щьмаэ'те мэ т'эмам хwэньдьнэ,
Щьмаэ'те мэ т'эмам хwэньдьнэ.
Һэвр'а һэрт'ъм к'ефф у шанэ.
Һэвр'а һэрт'ъм к'ефф у шанэ.[68]

We are deeply grateful for this achievement.
Our community is now well educated,
And its members live together in Lasting happiness and dignity.

As an additional example is a poem that was published by Hajie Jndi in Armenian:

Չեմ մոռանա, չեմ մոռանա,
Լենինի գործը չեմ մոռանա,
Թշնամիներից չեմ վախենա,
Լենինի ուղուց չեմ հեռանա:
Մենք աշխատում էինք՝ հարուստն էր ուտում,
Մենք վատում էինք ցավից, տանջանքից,
Մեր Սովետներին շնորհակալություն,
Որ մեզ ազատեց աղա ու բեկից.[69]

I won't forget, I won't forget,
Lenin's life's work I won't forget,
I won't be afraid of enemies,
I will stay true to Lenin's path.
We toiled while the wealthy dined,
We were buried with pain and sorrow.
We thank our Soviets,
Who freed us from begs and aghas.

[67] It should be noted, while the song was officially recorded in 1973, it had existed in oral folklore long before that.
[68] Keko and Jalil 1973: 3.
[69] Jndi 1954: 17.

Interestingly, orientalist Oleg Vilchevsky argued that the themes of Yezidi oral folklore changed during the early Soviet years.[70] According to him, during the years of collectivization, the Yezidis no longer sang about the heroic deeds of begs and aghas and the benefits of religion. According to him:

> They [the Yezidis] forgot their hungry past and turned to the future with hope. (…) This is primarily attributable to the correct, proven Leninist-Stalinist policies of our party (…).[71]

He argued that this was true Soviet folklore:

Привольное нынче житье для нас.	Life is easy for us now.
Шейхи и беки, ага и муллы,	Sheikhs and begs, aghas and mullahs,
Больше их нет среди нас.	They are no longer among us.
Сталин как чудо явился средь нас, Горести наши развеял, принес	Stalin appeared among us like a miracle,
Новую жизнь для нас.	Eased our suffering, brought us a new life.
Кулаков, дармоедов выгнал от нас; Подать, поборы, налоги никто	He drove out the kulaks and parasites;
Больше не требует с нас.	No one demands taxes, levies, or dues from us anymore.
К старым путям повернуть если нас	If anyone attempts to return us to the old ways,
Вздумает кто, не видать	They will gain nothing from us.
Пользы ему от нас.	Only uprisings and wars will our enemies see for now,
Только восстанья и войны у нас	At least one of us remains.
Увидят враги пока,	We will never allow Stalin's achievements to Slip from our hands.
Один хоть остался из нас.	We will never give up our new life.
Сталина дело из рук никогда	Stalin is our friend, he is our kin.
Не выпустим. Новую нашу жизнь	As long as the peasant and worker live in this world,
Не отдадим никогда.	He will never be forgotten.
Сталин наш друг, он родной нам.	
Пока Крестьянин с рабочим на свете живут,	
Не забудут его никогда.[72]	

[70] Cf. Vilchevskii 1936: 82.
[71] *ibid.*
[72] *Ibid:* 84.

The Yezidi poet Ahmed Mirazi also dedicated some of his poems to Stalin:

Я хожу по Москве,	I walk through Moscow,
Я смотрю на гранитные стены Кремля.	I gaze at the granite walls of the Kremlin.
Вижу Сталина,	I see Stalin,
Он говорит,	He speaks,
И ответом ему	And in response to him,
Поднимается наша земля,	Our land rises,
Поднимаются соки земли	The sap of the earth rises,
От корней до листвы,	From roots to foliage,
И листвою шумят тополя.	And the poplars rustle with their leaves.
Ты – самый душистый и яркий цветок базилик!	You are the most fragrant and vivid flower, basil!
Ты – Энгельса, Маркса и Ленина лучший, большой ученик!	You are the best, outstanding student of Engels, Marx, and Lenin!
Встречает тебя, провожает тебя народа ликующий крик!	The people's cheer of joy greets you and sees you off!
Народ понимает всем сердцем твой мудрый и ясный язык!	The people understand with all their hearts your wise and plain language!
Ты в самые корни законов вселенной проник![73]	You have penetrated to the very roots of the laws of the universe!

The active publications of books marked the moment to turn to journalism. The Bolsheviks paid more attention to the printing media. According to them, the press had not only economic, but also cultural significance.[74] Thus, it was essential to publish newspapers in minority languages. Consequently, in 1930, the Kurmanji newspaper *Ria Taza* was founded. The editorial board included Jardoe Genjo, Hajie Jndi, Amine Avdal, Jasme Jalil, Atare Sharo, and others. According to journalist and the last editor-in-chief of the newspaper, Amarike Sardar, *Ria Taza* functioned as an organ of the Communist Party and, therefore, disseminated its propaganda.[75] Moreover, he claims that censorship was very strict. Under state control, articles were composed discussing the issues of government decrees, the benefits of kolkhoz, and class and religious struggle. It also covered articles highlighting the successes of workers, the activities of schools, and the Transcaucasian Kurdish Institute, as well as the works of writers.[76]

In the June 1937 issue of the newspaper, journalists emphasized the role of Stalin in the development of Yezidi culture. There was also an article reporting the number of

[73] Горький 1938: 148.

[74] Cf. *ibid*: 75.

[75] Cf. Polat 2003.

[76] Cf. Chatoev 1965: 143–144.

people who joined the Komsomol. For instance, in 1934, there were 4 members of the Komsomol, and by 1937 the number was increased to 24.[77]



RIA TƏZƏ

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KRIZISA ÇƏSUSTJA WƏLATE BUR ŻUAZIE DƏRƏKƏ

Bb TЬVDARƏKJA BЬLЬND HAZЬR BЬN BONA BƏRƏVKЬRNA HASЬLATE

Ria Taza* for June 1937. Source: Hajie Jndi's private archive

In 1938, the newspaper was closed due to repression, and the editorial board was accused of anti-communist activity. The newspaper was relaunched in 1955, however, the Latin alphabet of Kurmanji was changed to the Cyrillic one. Below are excerpts from the new edition of the newspaper, as earlier issues are difficult to obtain.[78] How-

[77] Cf. Shamo 1937: 4.

[78] Selected examples are presented to convey the newspaper's content to the reader.

ever, the contents of the new edition were not significantly different from those of the old one (apart from the alphabets). The editors continued to describe the Party work, kolkhoz news, as well as works of the intelligentsia.

In the article "Kurmanji theatre group", the anonymous author discussed the exploitation of the Yezidis by begs and aghas.[79] He expressed gratitude to the October Revolution, which had turned nomadism into a thing of the past and led to the cultural development of the community. An article from March 1973 remarked on the USSR's role in helping the Yezidis to be liberated from oppression, claiming this was the reason that they were voting for the communists.[80] The article "The Dawn of Socialist Culture" discussed the USSR support for the small nations' cultures.[81] Moreover, they believed that socialist culture was an international culture.

Quite a few articles called for atheism, outlined that religion was an echo of the past. The kolkhoz section is noteworthy for its emphasis on women who highlighted their equal role with men in kolkhoz work. Moreover, women who were candidates for deputy of local government were also always mentioned. It is also worth noting the article on World Women's Day that points out the help of the USSR in the emancipation of women.[82]

Taken together, the main thrust of Soviet propaganda in art and media was the exaltation of Soviet authority, demonstrating the benefits of its implementation, and discrediting religious and tribal leaders. Constant comparisons of Yezidi life before and after the establishment of Soviet rule were even reflected in oral folklore. As noted above, the successes of the economic and cultural revolution (the formation of kolkhoz, the rejection of traditions and religious practices, etc.) were indeed actively covered and prioritized in the propaganda manual directed toward the Yezidis.

Conclusions

After the failure of the Russification policy, the Bolsheviks chose not to supress national identities of minorities, but rather reshape them in accordance with socialist ideals. Sharing a common socialist culture, Soviet peoples increasingly demonstrated loyalty to the government. Propaganda aimed at constantly praising the communist society proved effective; the policies of dekulakization, the establishment of kolkhoz,

[79] *Cf. Ria Taza* 1937.

[80] Cf. Mamedov, Ä. and H'ame 1958: 19.

[81] *Cf. Ria Taza* 1974: 3.

[82] Cf. Armenpress 1974: 2.

and then industrialization were expected to be adopted with the support of at least part of the population.

It cannot be denied that within the policy of *korenizatsiya* the Yezidis were given equal rights along with the dominant nations. Moreover, they formed an intelligentsia to study their language and culture. In turn, they had to express gratitude to the October Revolution, praising Soviet power and its achievements. On the other hand, in addition to providing access to education and cultural advancement, the Soviet regime distanced part of the community from their own people and traditional environment. The Yezidis are an ethno-confessional community, hence a religion plays a major role in the Yezidi identity. This did not fit into the Soviet atheistic paradigm, so propaganda against the clergy was needed. Thus, by limiting religious and tribal leaders' power, the Bolsheviks brought the Yezidis closer to the construction of communism. Powerful instruments of ideological influence, including schools, cinema, theatres, books, and newspapers, were employed to promote the Soviet economic and cultural policies and the restriction of the power of religious and tribal authority. Under the pretext of protecting women's rights, Soviet propaganda primarily pursued the goal of ideological mobilization; women's emancipation was viewed not as a valuable social goal in its own right, but as a means of incorporating traditional community into the Soviet political and cultural "project". Moreover, the actual educational opportunities were closely intertwined with propaganda rhetoric about equality and the enlightenment of national minorities, highlighting the dual character of Soviet policy. As a result, traditions not aligned with socialist norms were presented as remnants of the past.

Korenizatsiya, in essence, became a paradox of Soviet national policy: by providing a previously semi-nomadic Yezidi community without a written tradition, a language, a school, and a newspaper, it deprived them of the opportunity to operate beyond the prescribed ideological framework.

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საბჭოთა პროპაგანდა და ეზიდების ინტეგრაცია კომუნისტურ საზოგადოებაში კორენიზაციის პოლიტიკის დროს (1923–1934)

აბსტრაქტი:

ეზიდები სამხრეთ კავკასიაში ოსმალეთის იმპერიიდან მიგრაციის შედეგად აღმოჩნდნენ. ისინი ტრადიციული ნახევრად მომთაბარე ცხოვრებით ცხოვრობდნენ და ზეპირი გადმოცემით ინარჩუნებდნენ თავიანთ კულტურას, რადგან არ ჰქონდათ ფორმალური წერილობითიტრადიციაანგანათლება.საბჭოთაკავშირისდაარსებისშემდეგ,ბოლშევიკებმა განიზრახეს ეროვნული საკითხის გადაჭრა. მეფის რუსეთის რუსიფიკაციის პოლიტიკისგან განსხვავებით, მათ ეროვნულ უმცირესობებს უპრეცედენტო უფლებები მიანიჭეს. თუმცა, ამ უფლებებს სჭირდებოდა მათი ნდობის მოპოვება და კომუნისტური საზოგადოების მშენებლობის ნებაყოფლობით პროექტში მათი ინტეგრაცია. პროპაგანდის საშუალებების განვითარებით, საბჭოთა ხელისუფლებამ შექმნა საფუძველი მარქსისტულ-ლენინური იდეოლოგიის გასავრცელებლად. ამ პროცესს კორენიზაცია ერქვა. ამ კვლევის მიზანია გამოიკვლიოს, თუ როგორ გამოიყენებოდა ბოლშევიკური პროპაგანდა კორენიზაციის პოლიტიკის (1923–1934) პერიოდში მცირე ეზიდური თემის ტრადიციული ცხოვრების წესის შესაცვლელად, რათა ისინი კომუნისტურ საზოგადოებაში ინტეგრირებულიყვნენ. სამაგიდო კვლევის, სპეციალური ლიტერატურისა და საარქივო დოკუმენტების ანალიზის საფუძველზე, კვლევა აჩვენებს, რომ საბჭოთა ხელისუფლება ეზიდ საზოგადოებას აძლევდა შესაძლებლობას, შეესწავლათ საკუთარი ენა და კულტურა, გამოეცათ ლიტერატურა და ჟურნალისტური ნაშრომები, რომელთა მიზანი იყო კომუნისტური ღირებულებების დანერგვა და იდეოლოგიის გავრცელება. გარდა ამისა, საბჭოთა ხელისუფლება თავის პროპაგანდას ეზიდების საზოგადოების რელიგიური და ტომის ლიდერების წინააღმდეგ მიმართავდა და იყენებდა ხელოვნების მრავალფეროვან ფორმებს მათი ავტორიტეტის შესასუსტებლად და ეზიდების საბჭოთა სისტემაში ინტეგრაციის მხარდასაჭერად. შედეგად, ეზიდური იდენტობის ზოგიერთი ასპექტი, მათ შორის რელიგია და ტრადიციები, სტიგმატიზებული გახდა და წარმოდგენილი იქნა, როგორც წარსულის ნარჩენები.

საკვანძო სიტყვები:

ეზიდები;, იეზიდები, სსრკ, ანტი-რელიგიური პოლიტიკა, პროპაგანდა, კორენიზაცია, ინტელიგენცია.

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Isabel Broian

Propagandaya Sovyetî û Yekbûn (Entegrasyon) a Êzdiyan di civaka komûnîstda dema Polîtîka Korenîzasiyada (1923–1934)

Kurte:

Êzdî piştî koçbûna wan ji Împeratorya Osmanî hatîne Başûrê Kavkasiya. Wan jiyaneke kilasîkî ya nîv-koçerî jiyan û çand û kûltûra xwe bi riya devkî parastîye, bêyî ku çand û kûltûra nivîskî yan perwerda resmî hebin. Piştî teşkîlbûna Yekîtiya Sovyetê, bolşevîkan armanc kir, ku pir-

sa netewî çareser bikin. Bi berovajî polîtîka rusîfîkasyonê ya Rûsya Qeyserî, wan mafên nû û cara yekem da kêmayên netewîye biçûk. Lê her wisa ev maf lazimbû ku baweriya wan bi xwe bistînn û wan di projeya bi dilxwazî avakirina civakeke komûnîst da bin. Bi pêşxistina amûrên propagandê, desthilatdarên Sovyêtî bingehek avakirin ji bo belavkirina îdeolojiya Marksîzm–Lenînîzmê. Ev qonax û pêvajoya hate nasandin bi navê korenîzasiya (xwecîkirin/ indigenization). Ji ber hindê ev lêkolîn hewl dide ku lêkolîn bike ka propaganda bolşevîkî çawa hatye bikarînan ji bo guherandina jiyana klasîkî ya civaka biçûk ya êzdiya di dema polîtîka korenîzasiyada ya salên (1923–1934), da ku ew di civakeke komûnîstda bêne intigrasiyon kirin. Bi riya vekolîna desk research û analîza him jêderên taybetî û him jî belgeyên arşîvî, vekolîn nîşandike ku desthilatdarên Sovyêtî mecal dan civaka êzdiyan ku ziman û çanda xwe bixûnin û berhemên edebî û rojnamegerî çap bikin, yên ku armanca wan çandina nirxên komûnîst û belavkirina îdeolojiyê bû. Wekî dî jî, desthilatdarên Sovyetî hewl dan propagandaya xwe li ser serokên dînî û eşîretên civaka êzdî rêxistin û bi bikaranîna cureyên cuda yên hunerê ku desthilata wan sist bikin û piştgirî bidin yekgirtina êzdiyan di sistema Sovyêtîda. Di encamda, hindek aliyên nasnameya êzdiyan, di nav wan de dîn û kûltûr, hatin stigmatîzekirin û wekî têkiliyên kevn yên derbasbûyî hatin nîşandan.

Peyvên sereke:

Êzdî; Yekîtiya Sovyetê (USSR); polîtîka dij-olî; propagandayê; korenîzasiya; entelîgênsiya.

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The Slow Slog of Genocide: New Understandings of Yezidi Approaches to Survival and Justice

Abstract:

There is a misconception that the crime that is genocide ends when the immediate killing ends. Yet, the Rome Statute Article[1] (c) argues that genocide includes "deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to destroy"[1]. This article argues this slow, grinding aspect of genocide must be interpreted with attention to (a) how communities themselves articulate this violence and (b) how the international community, nation-state and aid organizations respond to this violence. In light of Native activists and academics' work on mass violence, this article adapts aspects of their work alongside Yezidi frameworks to expose how the slow slog of genocide continues through three gaps in international response: (1) the lack of appropriate conditions of life (2) the abandonment and radicalization of those in Al-Hol style camps; and (3) how Yezidi are practicing survivance. Through interviews, it reveals how Yezidi "conditions of life" and Al-Hol's radicalization incubate genocide and how Yezidis practice "survivance" through spiritual and legal resistance. As such, this article offers a new interpretation of the Yezidi case – one that insists justice requires not only prosecuting killers but also necessitates restoring the "conditions of survival".

Keywords:

Yezidi, Genocide, Survival and Justice, ISIL, Iraq, Al-Hol camp.

Introduction: The Unfinished Crime

The majority of genocide coverage focuses on mass killings, but genocide must be understood not as an event but a range that spans the gamut from mass violence to overall indifference. It exists in the sudden astonishments of violence and also the less visible unraveling of land, memory, and possibility in a steady grinding aggression. Yet as Kathleen Ho notes, "the idea of a disparity between actual and possible abilities to meet one's needs and the notion of avoidability in Galtung's definition of structural violence are directly applicable to the discourse of human rights".[2] To articulate this in

[1] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (last amended 2010) (Rome Statute) 1998: Art. 6 (c).

[2] Ho 2007: 3.

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the aftermath of mass killings in Iraq, this article interweaves the work of Indigenous scholars on slow violence like Woolford and Weaver's work building on Vizenor's articulation of "survivance" alongside Yezidi experiences of international abandonment to argue that this violence in the aftermath of mass killings should be seen in relation to the slow slog of genocide and not merely an aspect of its aftermath.[3]

As Lemkin's notes point out, genocide targets "the essential foundations of group life"[4] – not merely the physical bodies of those targeted, but also the land they till and the mirid institutions be they religious, cultural or practical like schools, hospitals and sacred spaces that allow the group to survive and to live together and, sometimes, thrive as a whole.

When these aspects are destroyed the group as a whole suffers not only the deaths of the community but also the inability on the individual level to maintain independence and autonomy to grow or obtain their own food and have their own income, ensure the education of their children, or simply not die grinding deaths due to lack of food, medical care or other violence caused deaths. At the same time, the solace of religion and sacred spaces have been targeted and with it the marking of the days through ritual and shared events. In this, survivors become unmoored from time, place, familial relations and culture.

This inordinate unmooring is what happened to the Yezidis in the aftermath of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)'s attacks on Sinjar, when many who had endured or escaped great physical violence entered another era of internally displaced persons (IDP) or refugee camps. Located in a space nominally removed from the killings but also often removed from a sense of home, these camps are by necessity made of immediately accessible materials and are not intended to be lived in for a period of more than a few months. Yet for Yezidi survivors like many others who have had to leave due to violence, these camps are occupied many years after the initial event.[5] The camps are, due to lack of available sanitation services, more likely to spread disease and they are often unsafe or become so due to their immediate construction or lack of resources. In Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) territory, these camps are also prone to fires and floods which cause preventable deaths and injuries. Then there have been waves of suicides as reported by the Free Yezidi Foundation.[6]

[3] Cf. June and Woolford 2024; Weaver 2022; Vizenor 2008.

[4] Lemkin 1944: 79.

[5] Norwegian Refugee Council 2022.

[6] Cf. Free Yezidi Foundation 2021.

In many ways, these issues are not unique to the Yezidi survivors. Many populations have found themselves displaced into "temporary accommodations" that become permanent. The difference is that in the case of the Yezidi people and others who have survived genocide (or famine) is that these camps may indicate that the genocide is continuing through the lack of appropriate conditions of life as defined in the Rome Statute Article 6 (c).[7]

Yet these camps often are the only option for survivors as they wait for the conflict to come to an end. Then they may have to wait for their homes to be rebuilt or their land to be demined. If, of course, they feel safe enough to return at all.

In the meantime, these stays may mean unchecked disease, either infectious or chronic, and poor nutrition that may have been easily addressed in the time before mass killing. Then there are deaths and debilities caused by the mental, physical and sexual violence that may remain untreated or undertreated as a result or a lack of resources. In addition to these sufferings, there are also the unseen mental scars that may result in suicide as the Free Yezidi Organization has recorded.

These slow-violence aspects of large-scale atrocity crimes that impact upon the "conditions of life" are the most often overlooked aspects of genocide as well as one of the oldest aspects. They may also be the most preventable.

What Are the "Conditions of Life"?

The Rome Statue defines the deprivation of the "conditions of life" as the intentional infliction of situations, such as lack of access to food and medicine, that are calculated to bring about the destruction of a group in part or in whole.[8] In lieu of the Covid-19 pandemic, it may be appropriate to argue that it is the removal of essential resources like safe drinking water, food, access to medication for acute or chronic conditions as well as safe surroundings that constitute the loss of conditions of life. In the aftermath of mass murder, there is another aspect I would include which is acknowledgement.

ISIL's actions have been acknowledged as genocidal by a majority of nations and many international courts of law on the basis of mass murder, sexual violence, the use of child soldiers, and the destruction of shrines and other sacred spaces. Yet there are also the aforementioned "conditions of life" that have been impacted through loss of home, long-term impacts of that loss through avoidable losses of life related to that displacement.

[7] Cf. Rome Statute 1998.

[8] *Cf. Ibid*.

However, the long-term impacts of these "conditions of life" are not solely due to ISIL's actions. Hardi notes that there was a three-year period of time before the land claimed by ISIL was restored.[9] It was during this time that the Central Government of Iraq (CGI) and the KRG as well as international organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) declared ISIL's crimes against the Yezidi to be genocide.[10] In those three years, Baghdad would also request assistance from the United Nations in documenting the atrocities and arguments between the CGI and the KRG would come to a head.[11] It would also see the establishment of insurgent camps like Al-Hol that held the families of ISIL members.[12]

The UN Investigator requested by Iraq "to support domestic efforts to hold ISIL accountable" and in their own words "focus its initial investigative efforts on those most responsible for the atrocities committed by ISIL, including through the ordering of such acts. This will necessitate an emphasis on senior ISIL leadership, as well as regional or mid-level commanders could conduct thorough and admirable investigations into ISIL violence, complete multiple levels of documentations and begin excavations of mass graves" as well as offer specialized psychological support and assistance to witnesses and victims with the support of the Netherlands.[13]

This support was an accompaniment to the influx of international aid from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that enabled schools, basic aid and a measure of medical attention, including mental health resources, to become available to either the evacuated or immediate (female) survivors of ISIL violence.

Thus, this three-year period between 2014 to 2017 was a moment of media attention and action. Many groups were fighting ISIL. There was also infighting among factions, movements of recognition of the genocide in spaces of international law, and an influx of aid from NGOs. Issues related to conditions of life were addressed as well as could be and blame for these losses would be laid almost unequivocally on ISIL.

After ISIL lost the land they claimed, issues related to the "conditions of life" must be considered in a more nuanced manner as the country entered a "post-conflict" period. An era intended to be one of documentation, rebuilding and reweaving society and overall restoration.

Instead, what occurred in practice, as often occurs, was anything but an advancement towards justice in a rewoven society.

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[9] Cf. Hardi 2019: 4.

[10] Cf. Anadolu Agency 2015; Human Rights Watch 2017.

[11] Cf. Firat News Agency (ANF) 2017.

[12] Cf. Rights and Security International (RSI) 2021.

[13] United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) 2018: 2; *Ibid*: 7.

Not all land was restored to the Yezidi (and others) who had lost their land nor did immediate demining occur making it more difficult to do so later. Nor did the Yezidi case garner international legislation through the International Criminal Court (ICC) regardless of how it filled the international stage with multiple appeals from lawyers like Amal Clooney and activists like Nadia Murad.[14] Then the pandemic saw the stagnation or cancellation of many of these programs when non-local staff no longer had access to the country or materials were unable to be transported. Some programs would not return after the pandemic as funding remained inaccessible.[15] Others would continue although survivors may have preferred other programs all together.

This is due to how many NGOs in the area are forced to operate a donor driven approach that shifts accountability leaving donors to enact their priorities over those who are "helped". Indeed, this model has long been the existent model in the area, with Hardi noting "the shift in funding focus post-2014 and its consequences for the local community; second, lack of NGO inclusion in funders' decision-making; and, third, NGOs' perceptions of funder inadequacies".[16]

And while these issues may dominate all areas addressed by NGOs, these issues are particularly acute in the years following mass violence for, they impact most directly on the conditions of life of a targeted community like the Yezidi and also may inadvertently subjugate the communities' goals to those of the NGOs.

The Architecture of Destruction

Scholars like Rosenberg have long acknowledged that genocide must not be seen as an event but rather a process.[17] Meanwhile, native scholars like Woolford and Estes[18] have argued that this process must be further expanded to incorporate a range of harsh events that may take place long after the immediate killing has ended during that period when culpability may be more nuanced.

As Woolford notes in his work, "Disease is conveniently removed as relevant evidence because it is classified as a natural process. But diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis, and industrial ailments such as mercury poisoning, were experienced by Aboriginal peoples as consequences of enforced contact with non-Aboriginal peoples, and as part of a structured set of destructive relations, that cannot simply be cat-

[14] Cf. Lederer 2020.
[15] Cf. Carlson 2023.
[16] Hardi 2019: 4.
[17] Cf. Rosenberg 2012: 16–23.
[18] Cf. Estes 2017: 115–122.

egorized as natural".[19] And while Woolford indicts those who colonized North America, his work also raises questions about who is culpable in the aftermath of other mass killing events.

The Nazis, were undoubtedly the architects of the Holocaust and the Porajmos, but they were not wholly responsible for the suffering of survivors that occurred before and after the mass killing. For example, there were the visa limits against targeted refugees.[20] Moreover, there are many Romani who were never compensated and who struggled to memorialize their dead in the years after the Second World War.[21] Similarly, ISIL were the architects of the Yezidi genocide but they are not wholly culpable for those deaths caused by preventable illness or accidents that take place in IDP or refugee camps, on the trip to Europe or the lack of solace offered by a truth and reconciliation style commission or an international trial.

Instead, the Yezidi genocide continues apace with reduced support for survivors from the international community or the societal reweaving in post-conflict and post-genocidal settings. Rather, many Western authors continue to imbibe the prejudice of their Muslim contacts when discussing the Yezidi.[22] A condition that once led Western observers to propagate negative stereotypes that had been used to sanction land grabs and Ottoman aggressions while disregarding Yezidi's own concept of self.[23] These self-same stereotypes allowed for ISIL aggression in the past and they continue to be referenced in modern society. A situation that continues to impact on Yezidi lives and social marginalization within the Iraqi mosaic.[24] And yet, many Yezidis continue to practice a form of survival, resistance and advocacy that makes them a force in the local, national and international communities.

Along the same lines, North American indigenous peoples remain a force within the dominant society, despite living in conditions that set them apart in terms of poverty, health, economic opportunity, education, and other indicators of social marginalization. This practice of care, survival, resistance and advocacy has been termed survivance.

Opposing to this survivance, in the Yezidi case, is the fact that the Yezidi genocide is not a moment but a systematic lack of outside care that leaves Yezidi vulnerable in

[19] Woolford 2009: 91.

[20] Cf. Strum 1984: 393–394; see also: Wyman n.d.

[21] Selling 2022: 54. Jan Selling records (Until 2017: 54, 76) that a pig farm stood in place of memorial at the site of a Romani concentration camp.

[22] Cf. Maisel 2013.

[23] Cf. Ali 2019: 77.

[24] Cf. Carlson 2019: 1–3.

the aftermath of the mass violence, othered in their society, rejected by other societies and also leaves another radicalized other in close proximity.

This relates to the combined impact of aid withdrawal, and lack of progress on justice efforts – be they trials or truth and reconciliation efforts or simple monuments of remembrance intended to reweave society into a whole as well as the unwillingness of members of the international community to reintegrate their ISIL adjacent citizens from Al-Hol has a profoundly negative impact on survivors. Yet, like the native nations profiled by indigenous scholars like Weaver, the Yezidi continue to practice survivance in spite of these difficulties.[25]

On Lagging Laws and Survivance

One group that continued to work with Yezidi survivors after the pandemic was United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) whose work had been pivotal in excavating mass graves, identifying victims and documenting ISIL crimes against all aspects of Iraqi society. They were in effect stood down in 2024 when the Iraqi government did not request an extension of their mandate.

This, however, has raised the question of how to enforce victims' right to truth and what will happen to the documentation UNITAD have accumulated. The UN will not hand over this information to the CGI as Iraq maintains the death penalty under the rules for evidence-sharing under Rule 73 of the ICC Rules of Procedure.[26] The Iraqi government and some militias have been condemned for acting without due process or for sectarian and/or financial reasons.

The question remains open as to this information's potential inclusion in a truth or reconciliation style tribunal as unlikely as this may seem presently. Nor could it be ascertained if this documentation would become available to national trials in other countries, like those conducted in the UK, upon request. Other organizations, like Yazda made their material available for this style of trials, for example.[27]

Yet the legal loophole that continues to fester are those ISIL sympathizers held in al-Hol style camps. Those held in these camps are often young. Nearly half in these camps are children whose mothers have been radicalized and left their nations of origin to attend to ISIL. They are held where they are because they are often foreign nationals in Iraq, whose government has resisted their return. Thus, these other governments are

[25] Cf. Weaver 2022; cf. also: Wanda and Woolford 2024; *idem et al*. 2021: 44–67.

[26] Cf. United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) 2005.

[27] Cf. Hadi 2025.

shirking the responsibility to (a) attend to their societies radicalized member (b) enabling the slow slog of genocide to continue because Yezidi survivors know that these camps may increase radicalization, increasing anxiety that the mass killing aspect of the genocide may simply be paused and (c) these nation states that abandon their citizens to radicalization that turns them into murderers are now implicitly culpable in the murders they cause. Not least because the areas where they are living are areas overwhelmed with their own issues. In the Kurdish area also, there are an estimated 2 million individuals who had been forcibly displaced, meaning that one in five people are either refugees or had lost their homes.[28]

After World War II, Lemkin's work would come to be enshrined in laws around the world but most notably in the United Nations and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. To quote, "For the purpose of this Statute, "genocide" means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group".[29]

In the years after the adoption of this definition, certain genocides would be acknowledged while others would not until long after they had happened like what happened in the Soviet republics. A few like the Armenian genocide or the past and present Nakba of the Palestinians are still subject to political wrangling. Still other charges of genocide like the in/famous "We Charge Genocide" 1951 petition which was written by Civil Rights Congress (CRC) argued that the then steady lynchings and systematic inequalities, including access to healthcare, in America should be seen as an intent to destroy, have been dismissed.[30]

Yet this 1951 petition raised the specter of culpability for the creation and acceptance of conditions that, if they do not overtly cause genocide, still allow genocide to continue. And though it was sidestepped at the time of the petition, later provisions were made to address the issue of "slow death" in international tribunals.[31] This includes steps such as the "Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power" which included provisions for the dignity of survivors and repa-

[28] Cf. *ibid*: 1.

[29] Rome Statute 1998: Art. 6. For clarity's sake the exact definitions of international crimes discussed in this section are drawn from the Rome Statute, an international treaty, which binds only States who are Party to it. However, the same crimes also exist in customary international law with minor deviations.

[30] Cf. Martin 1997: 35–61.

[31] Cf. Van Schaack 2018: 11–12.

rations for the suffering they've endured. More broadly, it is now generally acknowledged that governments have a responsibility to ensure, if not the dignity, then the survival of the impacted group.[32]

Most often, this is dependent on a determination that a grave crime like genocide has taken place. In the Yezidi case, as in many others, the details of the crimes committed against the people are known. They have even been unequivocally declared to have been genocide by various international courts, countless countries and religious leaders.[33] And while some would argue that Iraq's not ratifying the Rome Statutes complicates the push for traditional justice at the international level, as RASHID (Research Assessment and Safeguarding of the Heritage of Iraq in Danger) authors noted in the past, "National courts of States not Party to the Rome Statute can rely on customary international law to prosecute international crimes, if relevant treaty law or statutory law is not present".[34] Moreover, many of the formerly enslaved know the names of ISIL perpetrators and indeed, Yezidi testimony has been invaluable in multiple prosecutions locally and internationally.[35]

But, in the Yezidi case, the transnational nature of the perpetrating organization among other aspects complicates the push for, if not justice than closure, in international courts. This may have less to do with Iraq's choice to not ratify or the fact that many of the perpetrators coming from many countries as it has to do with a reluctance on the part of various nations to set a precedent of trying a trying a transnational organization, even one such as ISIL in international court.

Yet in his work on famines, de Waal has noted that most famines now occur for political reasons. That, in effect, these famines that are allowed to occur expose geopolitical realities.[36] Similarly, the unwillingness of the international community member states who have not returned, deradicalized and reintegrated their members are highlighting an unspoken political reality. These states are abrogating their responsibility for (a) the radicalization of their citizens, (b) the conditions that allowed for that radicalization and (c) the acts those citizens committed.

Similarly, these self-same states that have not taken active measures may then be considered culpable for the actions of their citizens or have a degree of responsibility for those harmed by them per the International Court of Justice's 2007 Bosnia ruling looking at the responsibilities of a state to prevent genocide.[37]

[32] Bakht *et al*. 2021: 24–26; see also UNGA 1985.

[33] Cf. Van Schaack 2018: 9.

[34] RASHID International *et al*. 2019: 39.

[35] Cf. Human Rights Watch 2017.

[36] Cf. Waal de 2017.

[37] Cf. International Court of Justice (ICJ) 2007.

That has left the bulk of prosecution and reparations for the Yezidi people in the hands of the KRG and Iraqi government. There are some benefits to this. For while many worked for the gold standard in international justice, a trial at the ICC with all the support it could bring, more local prosecutions would be considered less sullied by the UN which many Iraqis still see as being culpable in the harsh sanctions that harmed so many during Saddam's reign.[38]

In both the KRG[39] and CGI, international organizations have found prosecutions to be flawed affairs with the accused alleging torture and trial focusing heavily on their membership in ISIL over the suffering of their victims and for prosecuting ISIL suspects mainly under the counterterrorism law and not including charges of slavery and rape.[40] Additionally, although proceedings are open, victims are rarely asked to be present at trials and at least one Ninevah based judge argued that to do so would be too great a burden on the present system.[41] Moreover, the seeming abandonment of the Yezidi by Peshmerga forces on 3 August 2014 has led to a degree of distrust between some members of the Yezidi community and the official governments.[42] And while Iraqi courts can also exercise universal jurisdiction over human trafficking networks that are active in Iraq and neighbouring Syria, they may not have the wherewithal to take action against these networks.[43] Lastly, many consider the UN's documentation of the crimes committed by the Iraq Independent Investigative Team to be skewed due to its emphasis on the crimes committed by ISIL to the exclusion of crimes committed by other armed groups.[44]

Meanwhile, many foreign governments like those of the French refuse to repatriate their citizens to stand trial in their national courts and repudiate Iraqi efforts to try these nationals. Although some foreign governments like the US and Germany have made efforts to try their nationals in domestic courts for their actions that include the murder, kidnapping and enslavement of the Yezidi people. In this way, traditional justice, imperfect though it may be, has been stymied in terms of prosecuting ISIL.

[38] Cf. Van Schaack 2018: 27.

[39] The judicial system in Iraq has evolved differently in the Kurdish Region of Iraq and in the rest of the country. In the former, the KRG, which has jurisdiction in the governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaimaniya, has passed and applied its own distinct laws since 1992; Cf. Human Rights Watch 2017: 15.

[40] Cf. *ibid*: 39.

[41] One Nineveh judge told Human Rights Watch that while all hearings are open to the public, the court does not seek the testimony or participation of victims, and in fact would discourage it, saying it would put too great a burden on the system to maintain contact with victims; Cf. *ibid*: 37.

[42] Cf. Van Schaack 2018: 23, 33.

[43] Cf. Human Rights Watch 2023.

[44] Cf. Schaack 2018: 3.

An awareness of this, perhaps, spurred the creation of the Yezidi Survivors Law by the Iraqi government. This law includes provisions for the mental and physical health of minority survivors of ISIL violence as well as a housing, a living allowance, educational support and memorialization of the fallen. It is in many ways groundbreaking legislation. It has, however, been criticized by NGOs who argue that survivors should not have to file a criminal complaint to be eligible for reparations.[45] More damning, still, is the lack of awareness of the bill in the years after it has been passed indicating that it has been applied haltingly when applied at all.[46]

And so, regardless of the stated provisions in place, the Yezidi despite having multiple pleas to the international community have yet to, to quote Nadia Murad, "What we want is an international commission to examine the Yezidi genocide and draw up an accurate historical narrative. We want these people to have to stand up and explain why they did what they did, so we can all learn from this. We don't want everyone simply to be silenced and killed".[47]

Thus, instead of an overwhelming admixture of prosecutions in the international and domestic courts, reparations and excavation and burials of those in mass graves, many displaced Yezidis have found themselves in a struggle to survive. Indeed, as is known from labour studies, the marginalized can find themselves more marginalized if their access to the few resources they have such as access to the commons or ownership over small parcels of land are taken or spoiled as noted by Kaup.[48] This accurately represents what happened to the majority of Yezidis who were displaced from their homes during the killings. It is also a contributing factor to their struggle to survive.

In the words of one man interviewed by Isakhan and Shahab:

> When a lot of Yezidis were displaced – the vast majority of them were displaced into refugee camps – the Yezidi people then had no way of practising their religion and their culture and their religious holidays and so on. Those days were like we had lost our culture. Because there was no way to practise our religion… [in the refugee camps] many of the children and young people were starting to forget about their identity. Unfortunately, it is very hard when you are no longer in your homeland and when everything has been destroyed. The priority for you and your family becomes survival. You want to survive, you want to feed your family. Everything else comes second: education and culture and all that.[49]

[45] Cf. Human Rights Watch 2023.

[46] Cf. Travers 2023.

[47] Human Rights Watch 2017: 41.

[48] Cf. Kaup 2013: 112.

[49] Isakhan and Shahab 2020: 14.

It is this battle for survival that many have come to see as an ongoing aspect of the genocide. Many families remain in the same internally displaced camps they were thrown into either in the immediate aftermath of ISIL's siege or upon their escape. These camps bake in the summer and freeze in the winter. Fires are a frequent occurrence as members of the community struggle to both cook and heat their homes. Floods are not unknown. Medical care and educational opportunities are often hampered by the numbers of people striving for both. At the same time, such living standards create additional stress on the body and IDP camps are known to be prone to infectious disease and diseases of the poor. Moreover, in the aftermath of the pandemic, many of the services made available to (female) Yezidi survivors, particularly mental health care has been limited as NGOs that left at the beginning of the COVID pandemic and have yet to return. For those youth who were turned into child soldiers and sent against their own community there is nothing available. Even access to religious solace is hampered by the destruction of certain shrines and the inaccessibility of others due to cost and/or fear of travel.[50] All these factors combine to create such a potent admixture of despair that the IDP camps are known to have a "pandemic of suicides".[51]

Added to this stress is the awareness of Yezidi refugees abroad who die on their journey and an impending sense of doom as camps holding ISIL members like Al-Hol continue to be unaddressed. There is a great fear among survivors that Iraq and the KRG are not safe harbours. That the Yezidi homeland may be well and truly lost to its people as hate crimes against the Yezidi and other minority groups continue apace.

An end to this slow slog of genocide is what many Yezidi survivors see as vital. International recognition and traditional justice may be ideals that will help enshrine safety and security but they are only one step. Similarly, the Yezidi Survivors Law includes reparations and provides a potential framework for reconciliation in the future. The more difficult task is meeting the requirements that can halt the losses.

Unlike international tribunals this requires simpler solutions, many of which are already enshrined in the Yezidi Survivors Law and can be accomplished far easier with the return of the NGOs who left during the first wave of the Covid pandemic. Some of which will require support from other governments most especially when they take responsibility for the actions of their citizens.

Similarly, religious leaders of various faiths may seek to foster dialogue or offer a degree of redress not to outside media but to those survivors most directly impacted by the misguided or malicious actions of their followers. This is important in cases

[50] Cf. *ibid*: 9; Spät 2016: 163–169.

[51] Free Yezidi Foundation 2021.

where young children were subjected not only to Islamification but a particularly radical imagining that does not allow for other paths to exist.

Yet all these efforts will come to nothing if they do not involve a greater inclusion of people within the reparations and an unpacking of mistakes made. Sarkin, in his work on Uganda, has noted the importance of unpacking the past not only in terms of transitional justice, usually defined as "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation" but also more generally for it's impact on human rights and the rule of law in order to prevent a repetition of past mistakes and create groundwork for eventual reconciliation. And achieving reconciliation is essential to ensuring not only stability but also an end and not a pause to violence.[52]

Such unpacking of the past revolves around the legal concept known as the right to truth. On the international stage, the right to truth is enshrined in article 32 of protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, also article 24 of the 2006 Convention for the Protection of All Persons Against Enforced Disappearances and the amended Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights Through Action to Combat Impunity of 5 February 2005 reaffirms the right to truth as an 'inalienable' right.[53] The right to truth argues that survivors and relatives of those missing have a right to know what happened to their loved ones in order to provide closure. In the Yezidi case, this includes what happened to those women and children still believed to be enslaved and the location and excavation of the mass graves in addition to a general documentation of crimes committed. This documentation has been recorded by the UNITAD at Iraq's request. However, there have been issues with evidence sharing as UNITAD is required by law to refuse to share evidence with a country that has the death penalty. This conflict may be behind Iraq's request for UNITAD to cease documentation efforts. At present it is unknown what will happen to UNITAD records and without access to these records it is difficult to imagine reconciliation taking place.[54]

Moreover, it is important to remember that even if reparations and the right to truth are brought to bear in full, they are still taking place in a war-exhausted society with a government that has been called a kleptocracy. For as activist Ahmed Abd al-Hussein argued in *Tuk Tuk*[55] in 2019:

[52] Sarkin 2015: 112, 117.

[53] Cf. Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions… 1977: Art. 32; International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance 2006: Art. 24; Orentlicher 2005.

[54] Cf. Ochab 2023.

[55] The first issue of the revolutionary Iraqi newspaper named Tuk Tuk, published in November 2019.

> [T]he Iraqi people had been expected to endure all manner of indignities in support of a corrupt bargain. Poverty, the collapse of essential services, violent coercion, foreign interference—everything had to be tolerated simply to prop up the political system.[56]

And yet this is not the only challenge to reconciliation. It may not even be the largest one. The largest challenge to reconciliation is the continued existence of internment camps like Al Hol which have been described as bastions of radicalization. It is the existence of these internment camps more than anything else that causes survivors to see their current situation as an ongoing genocide that has merely seen a pause in the killings.[57]

In light of this, addressing the internment camps should be a key step in halting what many see as the ongoing genocide. The largest and most infamous of these camps is al-Hol camp opened in 2019 which is administered by the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria [AANES] in Northeast Syria. AANES has argued almost from the beginning that they do not have the infrastructure or capacity to indefinitely detain or prosecute the mainly ISIL families held in camps like al-Hol.[58] And while 3,000 individuals were repatriated in 2022, many governments remain reluctant to repatriate and prosecute or deradicalize their citizens who are held in these camps. Indeed, a handful of governments, mainly in European countries, have even drawn up legislation to remove citizenship rather than repatriate from their citizens.[59] Many of whom, it is worth noting are children under the age of twelve that are exposed to the potent combination of poor living conditions and radical rhetoric.[60] The reason for this is reluctance is unclear.[61] The UK argues that their citizens held in al-Hol and like camps represent a security threat if they should return to the UK.[62] How these self-same citizens are not a threat when held abroad in camps noted for their radicalism and their occasional permeable borders is also unclear.

In addition, it is known that these internment camps also house Yezidi women and children who are unable to come forward due to fears of violent reprisals.[63] The presence of Yezidi women and children in these camps and, it is believed in human trafficking rings, also constrains other pushes for justice. As one survivor stated in 2017:

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[56] Alkhudary 2023: 1–19.

[57] Cf. Ochab 2023.

[58] Cf. RSI 2021: 42.

[59] Cf. *Ibid*: 35.

[60] *Ibid:* 3.

[61] It is however worth noting many of the European women interned in these camps argue that they were first drawn to ISIL because of Islamophobic treatment in their countries of origin; ibid: 35.

[62] Cf. *Ibid*.

[63] Cf. Rudaw 2024.

> I would love to have justice for what was done to us. But I am worried about what would happen to the eight members of my family still being held by ISIS. Once my family is out, I hope that these men go to trial.[64]

Here, then, arises the largest issue related to the missing and with them any understanding of Yezidi survivance and modern articulation of international justice. As without international support, the return of those missing and dead through excavations and investigations and safe places to return to has been left more or less in the hands of the community. In this case, international trials may be desired but the survival, the safeguarding of those known to live but who are out of reach is survivance and if this means that other methods understanding justice remain beyond reach, this, also, may be survivance.

Conclusion

One reason the international community should take action to find Yezidi survivors and prosecute perpetrators is the importance in uprooting what has become an organized trade in human beings and antiquities that is being used to fund attacks not just against nation states but, often the most vulnerable members of the nation state. It was not, after all, not by chance that ISIL so violently attacked those it saw as being on the margins of both Iraqi and Kurdish society. The Yezidi, Christian, Shia Turkmen Shabak, Kaka'i all represented the region's rich and interconnected history and were less likely to be protected by others or have protections available to defend themselves. A similar pattern has followed ISIL affiliates in other parts of the world. While various governments may care for their vulnerable populations to differing degrees, these attacks make any nation state or, indeed, organization look weak and unable to defend itself.

Moreover, if the situation in camps like al-Hol are not addressed the worst fears of Yezidi survivors may be proven accurate foreshadowing of a future in which not only has the genocide continued but the killings have begun again.

In the meantime, justice requires centering Yezidi definitions of survival – just legalistic "event-based" genocide. The international community's abandonment of Yezidis to further marginalization and poor conditions that impact life and abdication of responsibility and rule of law in regards to those in Al-Hol by members of the international community fulfills genocide by omission.

[64] Human Rights Watch: 39.

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ჯანელ კარლსონი

გენოციდის გრძელი და რთული პროცესი: გადარჩენისა და სამართლიანობის ეზიდური მიდგომის ახალი გააზრება

აბსტრაქტი:

არსებობს მცდარი შეხედულება, დანაშაული, რომელსაც გენოციდი ჰქვია, სრულდება მკვლელობების დასრულებასთან ერთად. თუმცა, რომის სტატუტის მე-6(გ) მუხლის თანახმად, გენოციდი მოიცავს "განზრახ შექმნილ ისეთ სიცოცხლის პირობებს, რომლებიც გამიზნულია განადგურებისთვის". ეს სტატია ამტკიცებს, რომ გენოციდის ეს ნელი, დამქანცველი ასპექტი უნდა განიმარტოს იმის გათვალისწინებით, თუ (ა) როგორ აღიქვამს ძალადობას თავად საზოგადოება და (ბ) როგორ რეაგირებენ ამ ძალადობაზე საერთაშორისო საზოგადოება, ერი-სახელმწიფო და დამხმარე ორგანიზაციები. მკვიდრი მოსახლეობის აქტივისტებისა და მეცნიერების მიერ მასობრივი ძალადობის საკითხზე შრომების გათვალისწინებით, ეს სტატია მათ ნაშრომებს ეზიდების მიდგომებთან ერთად იყენებს, რათა აჩვენოს, თუ როგორ გრძელდება გენოციდის ნელი, დამქანცველი პროცესი საერთაშორისო რეაგირების სამი ხარვეზის მეშვეობით: 1) ცხოვრების პირობების არასათანადოობა (2) Al-Hol ტიპის ბანაკებში მყოფთა მიტოვება და რადიკალიზაცია; და 3) როგორ ახორციელებენ ეზიდები ყოველდღიურობაში survivanc-ს (მყოფობის, გამძლეობის, არა გადარჩენის, არამედ წინააღმდეგობის აქტიურ განცდას); ინტერვიუების მეშვეობით ნაჩვენებია, თუ როგორ განაპირობებს ეზიდების "ცხოვრების პირობები" და Al-Hol რადიკალიზაცია გენოციდს და როგორ იცავენ ეზიდები “survivance”-ს სულიერი და სამართლებრივი წინააღმდეგობის გზით. ამგვარად, ეს სტატია ეზიდების საქმის ახალ ინტერპრეტაციას გვთავაზობს — ინტერპრეტაციას, რომელიც ამტკიცებს, რომ სამართლიანობა მოითხოვს არა მხოლოდ მკვლელების დასჯას, არამედ "გადარჩენის პირობების" აღდგენასაც.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ეზიდი, იეზიდი, გენოციდი, გადარჩენა და სამართალი, ISIL, ერაყი, Al-Hol ბანაკი.

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Janelle Carlson

Hêdî-hêdîyê ya Jenosayîdê: têgihîştinên nû li ser rêbazên êzîdiyan ji bo mayîn û dadperweriyê

Kurte:

Têgihîştinek şaş heye ku dibêje gunehbarî û sûcê ku jêra jenosayîd tê gotin bi dawî tê demê ku kuştina yekser çêdibe. Lê, maddaya 6 (c) ya Statûya Romayê diyar dike ku jenosayîd her weha têda “bi qesd şertên jiyanê yên ku ji bo têkbirin û jinavbirna komkujî hatine hesabkirin” tê avakirin. Ev gotar diyar dike, ku ev aliyê hêdî-hêdî û jinavbirnê ya jenosayîdê divê bi çavdêrî were şirovekirin, bi taybetî li ser (a) awayê ku civakên ew bi xwe ev tundîyê çawa bi zimanê xwe xuya bikin û (b) dîsa mêkanîzma ku civaka navnetewî, dewlet û rêxistinên alîkariyê cawabê didin vê tund û tûjîyê. Di çarçove û ronaya karên çalakvan û akademîsiyên xwecî (native) li ser tund û tûjîya girseyîda, ev gotar hindek aliyên xebata wan bi çarçoveyên êzdiyanra têk dike, da nîşan

bike û bide dîyarkirin ka hêdî-hêdîyê ya jenosayîdê çawa di nav sê valahiyanda berdewam dibe: (1) nebûna şertên jiyanê yên guncav; (2) berdan û radîkalbûna wan kesên di kampên wek Al-Hol de; (3) çawaniya ku êzdî pêkol û berxwedana mayînê "survivance" dikin û pêk tînin. Bi riya dîtin û hevpeyvînan, ev gotar diyar dike ka şertên jiyana êzdiyan û şertên radîkalîzasyona kampê Al-Hol çawa şertên jenosayîdê zêdetir dikin, û ka êzdî çawa bi berxwedana rûhî û qanûnî "survivance" pêk tînin. Ji ber vê yekê, ev gotar şirovekirineke nû ya doza êzdiyan pêşkêş dike, şirovekirinek ku li ser vê yekê zextê dike ku dadperwerî tenê bi dadgehkirina gunehbaran nake, lê her weha lazime ku şertên "mayînê û jiyanê" werne dubarekirin.

Peyvên sereke:

Êzdî, jenosayd, mayîn û dadperwerî, DAIŞ (ISIL), Îraq, kampa Al-Hol.

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Repression of the Yezidis in the Armenian and Georgian SSRs in 1930–1940

Abstract:

This article examines the repression of the Soviet Yezidis during the Stalin period and analyses the state policy toward this minority. Like all Soviet people, the Yezidis were subjected to repression and deportation during this period. However, unlike in central Russia, the persecution against them was less severe and did not occur on a mass scale. Although the repressions of the 1920s and 1930s decapitated the Yezidis and weakened the influence of the tribal nobility, they did not result in the destruction of their social structure, which persists to this day. As a result of the repressions, the Yezidis' isolation was broken, accelerating their integration into Soviet society.

Keywords:

Yezidis, Kurds, the USSR, Armenia, Georgia, Repressions, Yezidi Clergy, Deportation

Introduction

The 20th (XX) Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Central Committee was a turning point in the history of the Soviet state. It is most remembered for Khrushchev's speech, which debunked Stalin's personality cult and acknowledged the illegal arrests and persecution of citizens for political reasons. However, despite this, the above-mentioned topic remained taboo for researchers for several decades. Only with the onset of "perestroika" the veil of secrecy was slightly lifted and the first publications on the subject appeared. Initially, these publications typically had little in common with academic research and were politically charged, aimed at denigrating the Soviet period of Russian history.

It's worth noting that political repression, as a tool to combat dissent, was used by the Soviet authorities from the very first days of the USSR. It reached its peak in 1937–

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1938, when the February–March plenum of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) outlined a policy of tightening repressive measures.[1]

According to most historians, the central focus of the NKVD's mass actions was operations against "kulaks"[2] and "according to national features", targeting "foreign" ethnic groups. In total, from August 1937 to November 1938, the NKVD of the USSR carried out 11 punitive "national" actions, namely: "Polish", "German", "Harbin", "Finnish", "Estonian", "Latvian", "Greek", "Iranian", "Afghani", "Romanian" and "mixed".[3] Within the "mixed" repressive action, researchers identify up to 20 punitive "lines".[4] The victims of these persecutions included individuals accused of spying for Hungary, England, France, the USA, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Turkey, and others. Currently, researchers have studied in detail four punitive "national" actions – "German",[5] "Polish",[6] "Harbin"[7] and "Greek".[8]

It's worth noting that the Kurds in the Caucasus were among the first to suffer Stalin's repressions, deported in 1937 from regions bordering Turkey. This topic has been examined by various researchers, both within the context of general processes and specifically in relation to the Kurds. N. F. Bugai made a significant contribution to the study of this issue. His works, devoted to the problems of deportation and rehabilitation of the Kurdish and other peoples, shed light on the political events of that period.[9] However, these works, as a rule, always focus on the Muslim Kurds living in the Transcaucasian republics and repressed in 1937 and 1944.

Until now, no researchers have attempted to distinguish the Yezidis (ethnoreligious group) from the number of repressed Kurds. During the Soviet period, they were traditionally considered a subethnic group of Kurds – the so-called Kurds-Yezidis. Only a few works devoted to the detailed history of the Kurds (Yezidis) have mentioned this topic in passing or provided general data.[10] Meanwhile, the topic of deportations and repressions of the Yezidis is also important because, while previously considered Kurds, today in Russia, Georgia, and Armenia, they are classified as a separate nationality in

[1] Cf. Аблажей 2019: 152.

[2] The term kulak which translates to "fist" in Russian, originally referred to wealthy peasant farmers in rural communities who accumulated wealth through land ownership and labour. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, kulaks became synonymous with the most affluent members of the peasant class, often opposing the collectivization efforts initiated by the Soviet leadership under Joseph Stalin in the 1920s.

[3] Cf. Аблажей 2019: 157.

[4] Cf. Аблажей 2019: 158.

[5] Cf. Дённигхаус 2011, Охотин 1999.

[6] Cf. Петров 1997.

[7] Cf. Аблажей 2008.

[8] Cf. Джуха 2006.

[9] Cf. Бугай 2012; Бугай, et al 1993.

[10] Cf. Чатоев 1965, Мурадян 2013, Guest 1987.

censuses, and most of them classify themselves as a distinct people.[11] However, this article does not address the question of whether the Yezidis are Kurds or a distinct people. The purpose of this publication is merely to summarize new materials revealing the nature of the repressions and deportations against adherents of the Yezidi religion without regard for their ethnic self-identification.

The article is based on documents from the National Archives of Armenia (NAA), the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs archive (GMIAA), the archive of the Spiritual Council of the Yezidis in Georgia (ASCYG), the Central State Archive of Literature and Art of St. Petersburg (TsGALI), and the National Archives of Georgia – the Central Archive of Contemporary Georgian History (NAGCACGH). The personal files of those repressed from 1929–1939, as well as investigative files, witness statements, certificates and decrees of the NKVD, and court verdicts, were examined in these archives. Valuable information on the rehabilitation of Yezidis deported from Batumi and copies of statements from relatives of those repressed to USSR law enforcement agencies from 1944–1990, stored in the archive of the Spiritual Council of the Yezidis in Georgia, also served as an important source for the article. Personal sources were also drawn upon, including letters and memoirs of participants in these events, stored in the aforementioned archives. These documents contain important information about the social origins of the Yezidis, their education, mentality, relationships within the community, attitudes toward the government, and assessments of changes in the country. They constitute a crucial source describing not only the nature of the repressions but also the conditions under which the Yezidi community developed. An analysis of case files held by the National Archives of Armenia revealed that 205 Yezidis were subjected to repression in the Armenian SSR between 1930 and 1953. In the same time 54 Yezidis were subjected to repression in the neighbouring Georgian SSR, of whom 17 were sentenced to death. All files are held in the Archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. It is worth noting that, according to the 1926 census, the Yezidi population numbered 14,523.[12] Taking into account natural population growth (at that time, Yezidi families had more than three children), it can be estimated that the Yezidi population between 1930 and 1953 could have ranged from 20,000 to 26,000. Thus, more than 1% of the Yezidi population of the USSR was subjected to repression.

Determining precise data on the number of repressed Yezidis in the USSR is very difficult. Firstly, during the period under study, Yezidis were often classified as Kurds. Secondly, nationality was not always indicated in archival files. Furthermore, a fire in 1992 in the administrative buildings of the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs

[11] Мосаки 2018: 104, *idem* 2014: 97.

[12] Амоев, Мосаки 2014: 16.

of the Georgian SSR destroyed most of the archival collections, including the archive of criminal cases, which may have also contained files on Yezidis.[13] Nevertheless, the available information allows us to conclude that, unlike the Muslim Kurds, the persecution of Yezidis was not widespread. As of January 1, 1953, among the 1,810,140 adult special settlers (aged 17 and older), there were 174 Yezidis.[14] Overall, representatives of this community were subjected to repression in three stages.

First Stage of the Repression

The first stage of persecution began with the establishment of Soviet power in Transcaucasia in the early 1920s. This period is characterized by the relative bloodlessness of measures taken against the majority of the Yezidis. Repression at this stage was aimed at weakening the influence of the tribal nobility and clergy. Their authority was at an unprecedented level, so the authorities demanded that work among the Yezidis be conducted with caution. Thus, in a report on the work of the subdepartment of national minorities of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Georgia, in terms of anti-religious propaganda, it is noted that: "The most backward and religiously fanatical among the national minorities are the Georgian Jews and the Kurdish Yezidis, who primarily live in cities. The influence of the clergy on them is very strong, and work among them requires great caution".[15] According to Chatoyev, in 1924, in villages populated by Yezidis, a significant portion of the members of village councils were represented by wealthy peasants and "kulaks".[16] The state sought to discredit them and oust them from governing the Yezidis. Consequently, the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Armenia demanded that local district party committees strengthen their activities among the Yezidis and involve more poor and middle-class peasants in Soviet work. As early as 1929, only poor peasants, farm laborers, and middle-class peasants were elected as Council deputies.[17] Over time, the measures taken by the authorities led to the exclusion of the most influential segment of the Yezidi community from the socio-political life of their people.

[13] Official response of the Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia (AMIAG) No. 2487090 dated September 19, 2019.

[14] Земсков 2005: 283.

[15] The translation from Russian to English was made by the author; NAGCAGMH, F.284, Op.1, D.1083, L.51.

[16] Чатоев 1965: 54.

[17] *Ibid.*

Parallel to this process, the training of Yezidi cadres loyal to the Soviet regime was underway. They were charged with the special mission of combating the remnants of the previous social structure of Yezidi society. In 1925, Marogulov, a member of the Council of National Minorities of the Armenian SSR, reported on the noticeably increasing party work among the Yezidis and noted the participation of a young clergyman, Suleiman Khalitov, whom he called for encouragement.[18] Marogulov further noted that "the harmful influence of the sheikhs and pirs (Yezidi spiritual castes) on the ignorant masses is noticeably weakening. The people have apparently seen the light somewhat and, albeit slowly, are steadily moving toward a new direction in life".[19]

Famous fighters against the old social structure were Teymurov Shamir and Arab Shamilov,[20] the first Kurdish Bolsheviks (as they positioned themselves) and participants in the Civil War. According to the Kurdish writer Amarike Sardar, Shamilov, as an instructor for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia on national minorities, "led an irreconcilable struggle against the Yezidi clergy, the agas, and the begs".[21] The apogee of this struggle was the publication in 1935 in Yerevan of Shamilov's famous Kurdish-language novel, Şivanê kurmanca ("Kurdish Shepherd"), which differed from the Russian version published earlier in 1931. For example, the Kurdish edition of the story included a chapter, "Once Again Among the Kurmanjs", in which Shamilov lists by name the most authoritative Yezidi leaders and clerics of the time, calling them "enemies of the workers" for their exploitation of the Yezidi poor.[22] Many of them were subsequently repressed under political articles, and some, such as Jangir-aga and Pir Kurdo Avdalov met their deaths in the camps. It is worth noting that the chapter "Once More Among the Kurmanjs" was never published in later Kurdish and Russian editions of the novel. However, according to Sardar, Shamilov himself was arrested in the late 1920s as a representative of the Yezidi clerical caste of sheikhs.[23] This thesis is essentially refuted by Vasilkov and Sorokina, citing data from the Archives of the Institute of the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences. They assert that "in 1929, Shamilov was briefly arrested as a result of a conflict with the local clergy".[24] Shamilov himself confirms these statements, writing that he was under

[18] Cf. NAA, F. 122, Op. 1, D. 234, L. 15.

[19] Cf. *Ibid*.

[20] Arab Shamilov was one of the most prominent representatives of the Kurdish intelligentsia of the former USSR, the author of the first Kurdish novel, and in the late 1920s, together with Marogulov, he created a Kurdish alphabet based on the Latin alphabet.

[21] Сардар 2018: 97.

[22] Шамилов 1935: 155.

[23] *Ibid*.

[24] Васильков, Сорокина URL: http://memory.pvost.org/pages/shamilov.html

investigation due to complaints from the clergy and the principality, but was acquitted, and the complainants were exiled.[25]

Around this time, the most authoritative and influential Yezidi leaders of the period, Usub-beg Teymurov[26] and Jangir-aga Khatifov, were arrested.[27] Both belonged to the beg class and were active members of the Dashnak movement.[28] However, they received a relatively lenient sentence for the time – several years of exile in Soviet Armenia. This leniency was explained by the patronage of Aghasi Khanjyan, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia.[29] Subsequently, after serving his sentence, Usub-beg Teymurov returned to his village of Shamiram, where he died on January 12, 1934.[30] Jangir-aga, returning home to the village of Choban-kyara, faced new charges from government authorities.

The early 1930s were among the most difficult and controversial in the history of the USSR. The country's measures to persecute wealthy peasants and forced collectivization led to discontent in the villages. According to Kuznechevsky, armed clashes became more frequent against this backdrop.[31] According to the OGPU, the reasons for this were "excesses, bungling, and distortions of the party line committed by local authorities in the area of collective farm development".[32]

As Zemskov's comparative statistics of those convicted for political reasons between 1921 and 1952 demonstrate,[33] the number of repressions and death sentences across the country increased sharply in the first half of the 1930s, driven by the policy of forced collectivization. Among the Yezidis, discontent with the Soviet regime grew, primarily among the community's elite. Tribal leaders, clergy, and wealthy peasants, unwilling to accept their isolation, agitated against the Soviet regime and collective farms among the Yezidi population. However, their attempts to create grounds for anti-Soviet rebellion by the Yezidis were ineffective. The Yezidi peasantry, having

[25] Cf. TsGALI, F.328, Op. 2, D.1837, L.2.

[26] Мурадян 2013: 198. Usub-beg Teymurov was the leader of the Yezidi confederation of the Hasni tribes. He was the last leader of the Yezidis in Transcaucasia recognized as such by the tsarist authorities. From 1918 to 1920, he was a member of the parliament of the first independent Republic of Armenia. He was closely associated with members of the Armenian intelligentsia, military leaders, and government officials.

[27] NAA, F.1191, Op. 14, D.878, L.503 Jangir-aga Khatifov was the leader of the Yezidi confederation of the Zukri tribes. In 1915, he and his unit defected to Russia. After the collapse of the Caucasian Front in 1918, he fought in the Armenian Corps. During the Battle of Bash – Aparan in 1918, in which the Turks suffered a crushing defeat, the Yezidi units of Jangir-aga made up most of the Armenian cavalry. He was closely associated with Armenian leaders.

[28] The Armenian Revolutionary Federation also known as Dashnaktsutyun is an Armenian nationalist and socialist political party founded in 1890 in Tiflis, Russian Empire.

[29] Cf. Мурадян 2013: 198.

[30] Cf. *Ibid*: 199.

[31] Кузнечевский 2015: 66.

[32] *Советская деревня глазами ОГПУ-НКВД: документы и материала* 2003: 325.

[33] Cf. Земсков 2012: 81.

suffered greatly from the events of the first half of the 20th century, sought to free itself from the oppression of the beg class, and they saw the Soviet regime as an ally in achieving this goal. For this reason, convicted Yezidis received relatively lenient sentences during this period compared to what was happening in the central regions of the country, with acquittals also common. The archives analysed do not contain any documents attesting to the courts imposing capital punishment on citizens of Yezidi origin in the first half of the 1930s.

One of the most significant cases of politically motivated criminal prosecutions of Yezidis during that period was case No. 223/158. Residents of the villages of the Armenian SSR, Ivan Kostirov (Atoev Rzgo), Mamoyan Shabab, Davrish Shamo oglu, Nadirov Bagir, Khatifov Said, Khudoyan Hamid, Taloyan Ordi, Khalatyan Samand, Mirzo Omar (Rashoyan), Kalashyan Bro, Asoyan Bro and Kaloyan Isko.[34] According to the investigation, those arrested, "being counterrevolutionary-minded elements, agitated for the acquisition of weapons for an uprising against Soviet power in the event of war, fought for the disintegration of existing collective farms and the non-organization of new ones".[35] It should be emphasized that among the accused was Bagir Nadirov, a member of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and former chairman of the village council of Akko, and Ivan Kostirov (Atoev Rzgo), a former communist and participant in the Civil War in Transcaucasia. Regarding the latter, the Chekists believed that after he was accused of murder in 1930 and expelled from the party, he became an "anti-Soviet element". After his release in 1932, Atoyev bought a Mauser revolver and, using his authority among the Yezidis, engaged in anti-Soviet and anti-kolkhoz activities.[36] In 1933, having received three documents with counter-revolutionary content from an unidentified person, he did not report them to the relevant authorities, but kept them with the Mauser revolver. Atoyev, for his part, denied all accusations against him except that he had failed to promptly report the documents with counter-revolutionary content to the NKVD.[37] Nevertheless, the investigation insisted on its version. The court verdict states: "The accused Kostirov, with the aim of spreading anti-Soviet provocation, visited a number of villages in Talinsky and Aparansky districts during 1934–1935. A characteristic fact of his "anti-collective activity" is the circumstance that before the arrival of the accused Kostirov at the dacha for the summer season of 1935 in the village of Turk Duzkyand in Aparansky district, 11 working farms submitted an application to

[34] NAA, F.1191, Op.18, D.414, L.84.

[35] NAA, F. 1191, Op. 18, D. 414, L. 2.

[36] NAA, F.1191, Op.18, D.414, L.84.

[37] NAA, F. 1191, Op. 18, D. 414, L. 85.

organize a collective farm, but with his arrival in this village and, due to his anti-collective farm agitation, these farms refused to join and the collective farm fell apart".[38]

Davrish Shamo Oglu and Mirzo Omar were members of the Yezidi clergy from the sheikh caste. The investigation alleged that they organized frequent visits to villages and urged Yezidis not to join collective farms, claiming that doing so would destroy the Yezidi religion and religious rituals and lead to the disappearance of the Yezidis "as a nation".[39] The former chairman of the Akko village council, Bagir Nadirov, was accused of spreading "anti-collective farm rumors" and of being close to the defendant Kostirov. In 1934, he refused to join the collective farm, sold his property, and left for Tiflis, for which he was later dismissed.[40]

Following the consideration of this criminal case in 1936, at a closed session, the court delivered guilty verdicts against the defendants and chose a preventive measure for each in the form of arrest for 7 years for Ivan Kostirov, 5 years for Shabab Mamoyan, and Davrish Shamo oglu and Hatifov Said, 4 years for Mirzo Omar and 3 years for Khalatyan Samand and Kalashyan Bro. The court found the claims brought against Taloyan Ordi, Asoyan Bro and Kaloyan Isko unproven and released them from custody.[41] Most of the defendants were former kulaks, which effectively sealed their fate, as the NKVD was largely indifferent to their innocence. At this time, numerous criminal cases were fabricated across the country, accusing citizens of counterrevolutionary activity, which was also acknowledged by some government officials. For example, People's Commissar of Justice of the USSR Rychkov and Chairman of the Supreme Court of the USSR Golyakov believed that the judiciary was blatantly ignoring the rights of the accused, turning the entire judicial investigation into an empty formality and the court's verdict into a rubber-stamp indictment.[42] In his letter of February 4, 1936, addressed to the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Molotov, the USSR Prosecutor Vyshinsky emphasized the danger of making mistakes, which was further exacerbated by the fact that "these cases are conducted without any witnesses and are based on intelligence data, and in a number of cases there is only one witness, whose testimony often contradicts that of the accused, who categorically deny their guilt".[43] For example, Said Khatifov, brother of the aforementioned famous Yezidi leader, Jangir-aga, ended up in the dock for privately expressing his opinion about the imminent

[38] *Ibid*.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] NAA, F.1191, Op.18, D. 414, L.85.

[41] NAA, F.1191, Op.18, D. 414, L.89.

[42] Cf. Верт, *et al*. 2004: 328.

[43] Cf. *Ibid*.: 215.

collapse of Soviet power and spreading a rumor that England wanted to "arrange a free life" for his brother and demanded that the USSR extradite him.[44] The entire prosecution case revolved around the testimony of a former kulak from the village of Kmlakut, where Khatifov had been staying.[45] Despite the fact that the case lacked any evidence of verification of the witness testimony, and the defendant himself categorically denied his guilt,[46] he was nevertheless convicted and sentenced to five years in prison.[47]

Second Stage of the Repression

However, starting in 1937, with the appointment of Yezhov as People's Commissar of Internal Affairs, the authorities' response to such sentiments among Yezidi leaders, as well as throughout the country, was very harsh. The so-called "Great Terror" (a period of the most widespread political repression) began in the USSR. Thus, the second wave of repression against the Yezidis began. It's chronological framework can be roughly defined as ending on March 17, 1939, when the trial of Case No. 7623 concluded. This case, one of the most resonant in Yezidi-Soviet history, accused the most influential Yezidi figures of that period of anti-state activities. It was during this period that the largest number of Yezidis were repressed.

A distinctive feature of the second stage of repression was the scale and bloodshed of the measures taken by the authorities. The accused were not only exiled to regions remote from Armenia and Georgia, but also subjected to the death penalty – execution. While previous repressions had targeted the agas, begs, clergy, and wealthy peasants, this time they were joined by Yezidi communists, scholars, journalists, and ordinary peasants, who had previously actively fought against the tribal structure of their community. The politicization of the repressions among the Yezidis at this time, in general, fit into the overall context of events unfolding in the USSR. Analysing archival documents from those years, court records, and interrogations, one senses the atmosphere of fear that pervaded all participants in the process, which was characteristic of that time. Many witness testimonies, which proved decisive in the guilty verdicts, were based on rumours and speculation. It is therefore not surprising that after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, most of those repressed were acquitted and rehabilitated.

[44] NAA, F.1191, Op.18, D.414, L.85.
[45] *Ibid*.
[46] NAA, F.1191, Op.18, D.414, L.87.
[47] NAA, F.1191, Op.18, D.414, L.88.

In February 1938, one of the prominent members of the Yezidi community of Georgia, Sharif Izmailov, was arrested in Tbilisi by the NKVD.[48] He was a former beg, secretary of the Komsomol cell, and accused of anti-Soviet activities. By order of the NKVD troika[49], Izmailov was summarily executed on March 14, 1938.[50] His family was not notified of this. Abesova Gyazo, Izmailov's wife, tried to find out about his fate for many years.[51] The archives of the Spiritual Council of the Yezidis in Georgia contain a statement she sent to the USSR Ministry of State Security in 1956. In it, she describes her husband as a noble, calm, and honest man and requests a review of his case.[52] Abesova's statement reads: "I ask you to inform me of the fate of my husband, Sharif, where he is currently located, whether he is alive, whether he will ever be released, or whether I, as a cleaning personnel, will have to bear the heavy family burden alone and whether I will be forever punished in life without him".[53] After repeated appeals to various authorities by Izmailov's widow, his case was reviewed by the Supreme Court of the Georgian SSR in 1957, which overturned the NKVD troika's decision and rehabilitated Sharif.[54]

In parallel with this case, in 1938, one of the most high-profile trials in the history of Soviet Yezidis began in Armenia. The most authoritative and influential representatives of the Yezidi community in the USSR found themselves in the dock, namely: Shamir Teymurov, Akhmed Mirazov, Gyanjuntsyan Armenak (Jardoe Ganjo), Javari Gadzhie Jindi, Khatifov Jangir (Jangir-aga), Tamoyan Jake, Aloyan-Muradyan Mraz and Usoyan-Rzgoyan Akhmed.[55] The interest in this case was added by the fact that all the accused, with the exception of Khatifov, Muradyan and Tamoyan, were former or current members of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), while Jardoe Ganjo (armenian) and Gadzhie Jindi represented the new Soviet-Yezidi intelligentsia.[56] This trial was preceded by the arrest in Leningrad in 1937 of another well-known representative of the Soviet Kurdish intelligentsia, the aforementioned writer Arab Shamilov.

[48] ASCYG, folder 4, L.1.

[49] A three-member NKVD commission empowered to issue summary sentences, including executions, without the guarantees of a formal trial.

[50] ASCYG, folder 4, L.2.

[51] ASCYG, folder 4, L.3.

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] *Ibid.*

[55] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.41.

[56] Jardoe Ganjo was a writer and a member of the Kurdish Soviet intelligentsia. From 1934 to 1938, he was the editor-in-chief of the Kurdish newspaper "Rya Taza". Gadzhie Jindi is a Kurdish writer, scholar, and educator. He is the author of numerous works on Kurdish folklore, literature, and language. In 1946, he developed a Kurdish alphabet based on the Cyrillic alphabet. From 1959 to 1967, he worked at the Armenian Academy of Sciences.

He was accused of organizing anti-Soviet rebel activities among the Kurds of Armenia with the goal of establishing a free Kurdistan under the protectorate of England.[57] The investigation believed that Shamilov, acting on instructions from the Khoybun organization, recruited the defendants Teymurov, Khatifov, Gyanjuntsyan, Mirazov and Javari to carry out the work.[58] The NKVD believed that all of them, as influential figures, formed a rebel center among the Yezidis of Armenia and directed the anti-Soviet activities.

However, the inconsistencies in the investigation of this case were obvious from the very first days. Firstly, it was claimed that Shamilov was the organizer and leader of the rebel center, although, as is known from his biography, he lived in Leningrad from 1931 and was engaged in scientific work there until his arrest in early 1937.[59] Accordingly, being far from Armenia, he could not have led the rebel group. Secondly, the investigation believed that all the detainees were carrying out the will of the "Kurdish-Dashnak committee "Khoybun" represented by Bedirkhan" located in Aleppo,[60] but this contradicts other materials of the case, in particular, the report prepared by the NKVD on Khatifov (Jangir-aga), which states that in his activities he was guided by the instructions of the head of all the sheikhs in Iraq, Mir Ismail, who is called a "political agent of the British".[61] Finally, the defendants belonged to ideologically opposed camps, while Jangir Khatifov hailed from the beg class and was once a respected leader of the Yezidi people, the others represented the new Yezidi-Kurdish elite, which emerged specifically in the fight against the begs and agas. In this regard, Shamir Teymurov's statement at the trial is quite revealing: "I waged a struggle against the sheikhs, begs, and other counterrevolutionary elements, in particular against the defendant Khatifov".[62]

There was no unity among the members of the new Yezidi elite. Each of them fought against one another. As is evident from Grachiy's testimony. Kochar and Jasme Jalil, Jardoe Ganjo (Armenak Gyanzhuntsyan) and Gadzhie Jindi complained about Arab Shamilov's counterrevolutionary work and called him an anti-Soviet element.[63] In this regard, Grachiya Kochar emphasized: "They were both against Shamilov and tried in

[57] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.15.

[58] *Ibid*.

[59] Васильков, Сорокина URL: http://memory.pvost.org/pages/shamilov.html

[60] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.15. The Khoybun Committee was a Kurdish organization that emerged in 1927 in Syria and fought for the political and cultural rights of Kurds. Its members included prominent Kurdish figures of the period: Kadri Jamil Pasha Ekrem, Muhammad Jamil Pasha, Hamza Moksi, Jeladet Ali Bedirhan, Kamuran Ali Bedirhan, Arakol Azizan and many others.

[61] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.17.

[62] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.878, L.503.

[63] NAA, F. 1191, Op. 14, D. 878, L.494 and L.495.

every way to avoid not only working with him, but even meeting him".[64] Gadzhie Jindi himself confirmed in court that he, along with Kurdish and Armenian writers such as Grachia Kochar, Ganjuntsyan Armenak, Jasme Jalil and others exposed the convicted Shamilov.[65] However, this accusation clearly demonstrates Shamilov's leading role in the Yezidi community. Moreover, it should be noted that, in the competitive struggle, members of the new Kurdish elite spread information about him, knowing that it could cause him serious harm. Moreover, the denunciations were not always motivated by self-preservation.

The testimony of Jardoe Ganjo (Armenak Ganjuntsyan), who headed the newspaper "Rya Taza", sheds light on the true causes of the contradictions within the Kurdish-Yezidi intelligentsia of that period. According to him, representatives of the younger generation of intellectuals were dissatisfied with the role assigned to them. They didn't like the fact that Arab Shamilov was taking credit for all the work among the Kurds. They also didn't like the fact that, with Shamilov's support, the leading positions among the Kurdish intelligentsia were mostly occupied by Armenians.[66] Against this backdrop, young Kurdish-Yezidi intellectuals began a struggle against Shamilov and achieved his departure from Armenia.[67] As Shamilov himself notes in his memoirs, in 1931 he submitted a petition to the party to be sent to study in Leningrad.[68] There, he entered the propaganda department of the Stalin Communist University.[69] One way or another, even after his release in the 1950s, Shamilov apparently had no idea that his comrades, many of whom he personally helped and advised on career advancement, were writing denunciations against him. To be fair, it should be noted that Gadzhie Jindi was one of the few who regretted his actions. After Shamilov's release Jindi supported him in every possible way and subsequently made an invaluable contribution to the popularization of his work. The National Archives of Armenia preserves his letter to the Council of Ministers of the Armenian SSR, dated June 11, 1979, in which he petitioned to name a Kurdish school after Arab Shamilov to perpetuate his memory.[70]

In general, this criminal case was virtually indistinguishable from the vast majority of cases throughout the country that were given a political character in the second half of the 1930s. It was conducted, as if following a template, using the same meth-

[64] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.878, L.494.
[65] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.878, L.493.
[66] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.876, L.92.
[67] *Ibid.*
[68] *Ibid.*
[69] TcGALY, F.328, Op.2, D.1837, L.1.
[70] NAA, F. 883, Op.1, D. 144, L.16.

ods and techniques, with standard charges, violating all legal procedures, completely disenfranchising the accused, and making decisions that were unappealable. During the preliminary investigation, physical violence was used against the defendants, with the help of which they were forced to sign "confessions". This was confirmed in court by Jangir-aga, Akhmed Mirazov, Jake Tamoyan and others stated that for this reason they had given false testimony against themselves and the other defendants.[71] Moreover, the Chekists did not spare even those who had once helped them in "exposing counterrevolutionary elements". Thus, in his testimony, Jake Tamoyan notes: "When I was the authorized representative of the village council, employees of the NKVD department came to me for all kinds of assistance in the matter of detaining bandits and I helped them in this matter... During the preliminary investigation, I also slandered the defendants Gyanzhuntsyan Armenak and others, claiming they were members of a counterrevolutionary Kurdish rebel organization, when I had heard and noticed nothing bad about them, and I was forced to testify. The day before the military prosecutor was scheduled to attend my interrogation, investigator Khoylunts summoned me in advance and warned me to confirm all my previous testimony, threatening me with further physical violence, which I did".[72] In turn, witnesses, fearing the prospect of being brought to trial, and some out of personal animosity, sometimes made absurd statements, further exacerbating the defendants' already unenviable position. For example, Rashid Mirzoyan, a member of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and secretary of the Alagez Komsomol, asserted: "After the treacherous suicide of Khanjyan Agasi, the defendant Gyanjuntsyan arrived in the village of Türk-Pamb and stayed with the anti-Soviet element Iboev Hasan. After his arrival, he spoke among individual peasants and collective farmers about how Khanjyan had been killed by Georgians. I personally was not present at this conversation and did not hear it, but collective farmers told me, but I cannot now indicate who exactly... The defendant Gyanjuntsyan, as I heard from others, was associated with enemies of the people Shamilov Arab, Kostirev Ivan, and others, and praised them. He gave Shamilov a false and inaccurate certificate of his social origin and published articles with counterrevolutionary content in the newspaper "Rya Taza", but I personally do not know these facts".[73] Gyanjuntsyan (Jardoe Ganjo) himself countered the witness's accusations: "I was not in Aparan district during the days of Khanjyan's suicide, but in Tallinn, which is quite a distance from the vil-

[71] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.878, L.503, L.484, L.488.

[72] *Ibid*

[73] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.878, L.496.

lage, now in the Alagez district, and therefore could not have gotten there so easily. The witness did not testify to a single counterrevolutionary statement he heard from me".[74]

Even those who sympathized with the defendants were afraid to support them openly. The criminal case file contains an anonymous letter addressed to the USSR People's Commissar of Internal Affairs, Beria. In it, the unknown author demands Armenak's release from custody. Ganjuntsyan and Gadzhiye Jindi citing the fact that they were arrested indiscriminately and on the basis of a denunciation by the Dashnaks.[75]

In 1939, a court hearing was held, following which a verdict was passed on the defendants.[76] According to it, Mirazov Akhmed, Teymurov Shamir, Aloyan-Muradyan Mraz, Gadzhie Jindi and Armenak Ganjuntsyan (Jardoe Ganjo) were acquitted and released.[77] This was taking into account the fact that the last two defendants were considered by the investigation to be "leaders and ideological inspirers of an anti-Soviet Kurdish rebel organization in Armenia".[78] This court decision was dictated more by political expediency than by a desire for justice to prevail. The fact is that in November 1938, Yezhov was replaced as People's Commissar of Internal Affairs by Beria. That same month, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) approved the resolution "On Arrests, Prosecutor's Supervision, and the Conduct of Investigations".[79] It, in particular, noted the shortcomings of the NKVD and the prosecutor's office. An irresponsible attitude toward investigative proceedings and a gross violation of procedural rules established by law were often skilfully exploited by enemies of the people who had infiltrated the NKVD and the prosecutor's office, both centrally and locally. They deliberately distorted Soviet laws, committed forgeries, falsified investigative documents, prosecuted and arrested people on trivial grounds, and even created provocative "cases" against innocent people without any grounds at all, the document stated.[80] In connection with this, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) ordered the NKVD to make arrests only by court order or with the prosecutor's sanction, and also abolished judicial *troikas*.[81] All these

[74] *Ibid.*

[75] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.71.

[76] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.73.

[77] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.74.

[78] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.53.

[79] Resolution of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) No. P 4387 of November 17, 1938 "On Arrests, Prosecutor's Supervision, and the Conduct of Investigations".

[80] *Ibid.*

[81] *Ibid.*

measures, of course, did not lead to an end to the repressions, but they did reduce their scale and served as a signal to the judiciary, which began issuing acquittals more often.

As for Tamoyan Jake and Usoyan-Rzgoyan Akhmed the court found him guilty and sentenced them to three and six years in a forced labour camp (FLC), respectively, without loss of political rights.[82] Admittedly, this was a light sentence for the time. This "leniency" likely stemmed from the fact that the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs was replaced at that time, which temporarily softened their sentences. However, they could not be fully exonerated, lest they undermine the government's authority. As a former collective farm chairman, Tamoyan had a negative reputation.[83] As part of the NKVD's informant network, he was responsible for the arrest of fellow villagers, which earned him many enemies.[84] Therefore, it is not surprising that when he himself ended up in the dock, many were willing to testify against him. Usoyan-Rzgoyan, meanwhile, was accused of attempting to assassinate another communist.[85]

However, the most tragic fate awaited Jangir-aga, a former beg and commander of the Yezidi volunteer militias under the Dashnaks. At that time, he remained the last authoritative leader among the Yezidis. The state saw him as a threat to its influence and could not allow him to be acquitted, so Jangir-aga was given the harshest sentence. "Due to his advanced age, he is to be imprisoned for 10 years in a labor camp, with deprivation of his political rights for 5 years and confiscation of all personal property",[86] the court's verdict against Jangir-aga stated. For a man his age – Jangir-aga was 65 at the time[87] – this sentence meant certain death. He was sent to serve his sentence in the Novo-Kamensky labor camp, also known as Kamenlag, located in Saratov region.[88] It was one of the most brutal camps of that period, created by order of the NKVD in April 1942.[89]

Journalist and poet Morozov, who served his sentence there from 1943 to 1944, wrote in detail about life and everyday life in Kamenlag in his book, *Nine Steps to Oblivion*.[90] According to his testimony, the prisoners "had to eat grass and drink water from streams just to quench their thirst".[91] Because of this, they often fell ill. Jangir-aga was

[82] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.74.

[83] *Ibid*.

[84] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.878, L.481.

[85] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.74.

[86] *Ibid*.

[87] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.878, L.479.

[88] Response to the request from the Saratov Region Government Administration No. 0302-42/18 dated January 22, 2019.

[89] Register of German settlements in Russia.

[90] Морозов 1991.

[91] *Ibid*: 86.

no exception. According to Yagubyan, an eyewitness to those events, his condition worsened with each passing day; he did not eat anything for seven days.[92] "He died at night. They did not immediately learn of his death, and the prisoners received his rations for three days. Then his body lay in the basement for 10 days, until two cartloads of corpses had accumulated. They were then taken away in carts and buried in mass graves. I know the location of his burial. There was a Gothic-style church, with warehouses nearby, and mass graves were dug nearby".[93] The archival records of the Main Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for the Saratov Region state that Jangir-aga died on July 5, 1943, from pellagra, a disease caused by prolonged malnutrition.[94] As Zemskov notes, the highest death rate in the camps occurred in 1942–1943. During this time, 661,000 prisoners died, a consequence of significant reductions in food rations due to the extreme military situation.[95]

The verdict in this criminal case was the latest in a series of politically motivated repressions against Yezidis at this stage. Although politically motivated arrests continued throughout the country, even after the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War in 1941, their number had significantly decreased compared to previous years.

Third Stage of the Repression

Beginning with the Great Patriotic War, the primary form of mass repression became the deportation of "unreliable" peoples to remote areas of the country. In total, 61 nationalities were deported during the war.[96]

In 1944, while fierce fighting with Nazi Germany continued, Muslim Kurds from the Transcaucasian republics, along with Turks and Hemshin people, were deported en masse to Central Asia and Kazakhstan. According to Doctor of Historical Sciences Bugai, the deportation of these national minorities was due to a combination of internal factors and international factors.[97] He notes that Turkey could have allied with Germany, threateningly amassing 28–30 divisions near the Soviet border. Stalin was concerned about the sentiments of the Muslim border population, which, according to NKVD archival documents, could allegedly side with Turkey in the current situation.[98] A certain role was also played by the fact that in 1942, during the Nazi advance toward

[92] NAA, F.1191, Op.14, D.879, L.75.

[93] *Ibid.*

[94] Response to the request from the Main Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for the Saratov Region No. 18/7-11 dated 01/09/2019, L.3.

[95] Земсков 2012: 83.

[96] State Archives of the Russian Federation, F.A-321, Op.2, D.721, L.85.

[97] Cf. Бугай 2002: 160.

[98] Cf. *Ibid.*

the Caucasus, the Germans included Kurds in the North Caucasian Legion, which was part of the 162nd Infantry Division under the command of Oskar Niedermayer, who had extensive experience working among the Kurds.[99] All of this ultimately laid the foundation for the third stage of repression. As part of these deportations, the Yezidis of Batumi were also targeted and classified as Kurds. Precise data on the number of Yezidis deported during this period is lacking. The only source that allows us to estimate the number of Yezidis in Batumi is the 1926 USSR census, which counted Yezidis and Kurds separately. According to it, 54 Yezidis lived in the Adjaristan ASSR.[100] All of them were urban residents. Taking into account natural growth, it can be assumed that by 1944 their number in Batumi could easily have exceeded 100 people.

Traditionally, Kurds constituted one of the largest ethnic minorities in this region of the Georgian SSR. According to the same 1926 USSR census, in Adjaristan, after Georgians, Armenians, Russians, and Greeks, the Kurds numbered 3,295.[101] Therefore, it is not surprising that the Yezidis here were classified as Kurds and subjected to deportation, and the authorities showed little interest in addressing the religious differences between them. In this regard, the following fact should be noted: in the case files of previously repressed Yezidis from Georgia or Armenia, the nationality column always listed "Yezidi" or "Kurd-Yezidi", but in the case of the Yezidis of Adjaristan, only "Kurd" was indicated. For example, in the case of Amirov Bondo, a member of the Yezidi clergy from Batumi convicted of counterrevolutionary activities in 1938, listed his nationality as "Kurd".[102] A similar situation existed with other Batumi Yezidis. Information about some of them is stored in the archives of the Spiritual Council of the Yezidis in Georgia. This archive also contains information about the 1944 repressions against Batumi Yezidis, from which one can infer the age and gender composition of those deported. A distinctive feature of this period was that entire Yezidi families were deported. The archives contain dozens of documents attesting to the expulsion of women and children who could not pose any danger to the state. Thus, in the certificate of rehabilitation of Daloyan Khazan, issued by the Prosecutor General's Office of Kyrgyzstan in 1999, it is stated that "from 1944 to March 13, 1947, she was registered in a special settlement in the Budenovsky district of the Talas region of the Kyrgyz SSR, as a person of Yezidi nationality".[103]

[99] Cf. Жигалина 2010: 338.

[100] All-Union Population Census of 1926. National composition of the population by region of the republics of the USSR.

[101] *Ibid*.

[102] Сталинские списки из Грузии – Открытый список: https://ru.openlist.wiki Амиров_Бондо_Авдоевич_(1900)

[103] ASCYG, folder 4, L.5.

It is worth noting that news of the deportation of the Yezidis from Batumi quickly spread among their relatives living in Tbilisi. Eyewitness accounts of those events indicate that the Yezidis in Tbilisi were frightened; most of them packed their belongings and waited for the authorities to come for them. Rumors circulated that the authorities would deport them to Karayazi, a district on the Georgian-Azerbaijani border.[104] However, these rumors were later unfounded, and the deportation bypassed the Yezidis in Tbilisi.

Conclusion

A common feature of that era, which was also characteristic of Western countries, was the "trend towards cruelty". Camps, repressions, and deportations became tools in the hands of ruling elites to eliminate their competitors. Many Western countries had their own camps where many people died. The United States, which is often considered the epitome of democracy, actively used repressions against its own national minorities. The deportation of Japanese Americans is a notable example. In turn, the German Nazi camps, which became camps of targeted extermination, were nothing more than an extension of the English camps for the Boers in South Africa and the Austrian camps of World War I for the Slavs. In comparison, the Soviet camps fit into the traditional penitentiary system of the Modern era. Thus, like most peoples of the USSR, the Yezidis found themselves under attack by the state's repressive machinery during the Stalin period. The persecution of them, in general, fit within the context of the general repressions taking place in the country during that period. However, the repressions against the Yezidis, compared to those in central Russia, were less severe and targeted primarily members of the beg class and the clergy, who sought to maintain their influence over the Yezidi community. The authorities sought to break the Yezidis' isolation and integrate them into Soviet society, a move resisted by the begs and clergy, who saw it as a threat to the existence of the Yezidi community. Although the repressions of the 1920s and 1930s decapitated the Yezidis and weakened the influence of the tribal nobility, they did not lead to the destruction of their social structure, which remains in place to this day. As a result of the repressions, the Yezidis' isolation was broken, accelerating their integration into Soviet society. This is how national policy was built in the USSR, where state laws and Soviet values gradually supplanted ethnic traditions.

[104] ASCYG, folder 5, video 2.

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რუსტამ რზგოიანი

ეზიდური მოსახლეობის რეპრესიები საქართველოსა და სომხეთის საბჭოთა სოციალოსტურ რესპუბლიკებში 1930–1940 წლებში

აბსტრაქტი:

ეს სტატია იკვლევს საბჭოთა ეზიდების რეპრესიებს სტალინის პერიოდში და აანალიზებს სახელმწიფო პოლიტიკას ამ უმცირესობის მიმართ. ყველა საბჭოთა მოქალაქის მსგავსად, ამ პერიოდში, ეზიდებსაც შეეხოთ რეპრესიები და დეპორტაცია. თუმცა, ცენტრალურ რუსეთთან შედარებით, მათ მიმართ დევნა ნაკლებად მკაცრი იყო და მასობრივ ხასიათს არ ატარებდა. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ 1920-იანი და 1930-იანი წლების რეპრესიებმა ეზიდების რელიგიური და საერო ლიდერების გავლენა შეასუსტა, ამას მათი სოციალური სტრუქტურის განადგურება არ გამოუწვევია – ის დღემდე შემორჩა. რეპრესიების შედეგად ეზიდების იზოლაცია დაირღვა, რამაც დააჩქარა მათი საბჭოთა საზოგადოებაში ინტეგრაცია.

საკვანძო სიტყვები:

იეზიდები, ეზიდები, ქურთები, სსრკ; სომხეთი, საქართველო, რეპრესიები, ეზიდი სასულიერო პირები, დეპორტაცია.

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Rustam Rzgoyan

Binpêkirina (Repression) Êzîdiyan li SSR-yên Ermenistan û Gurcistanê di salên 1930–1940 de

Kurte:

Ev gotar represyona êzdiyên sovyêtî lêkolîn dike di dema Stalînda û polîtîka dewletê ya li himber vê kêmanîyê analîz dike. Wekî hemû miletên Sovyêtê, êzdî jî di vê demêda tûşî rêprêsyon û koçberbûnê bûn. Lê, ne wek li herêmên naverast yên Rûsyayêda, li dijî êzdiyan tundî kêm bû û ne bi teherekî berfreh bû. Her çende prosêsa rêprêsyonan salên 1920 û 1930 ser êzdiyan bû sebebê serîbirîn civakê û bandora rêberên eşîretan sist kir, lê strûktûra civakî ya wan bi tevahî nehate hilweşandin; strûktûreke ku heta îro jî maye. Di encamê wê prosesêda, bi rêprêsyona îzolasyona êzdiyan hate şikênandin û pêvajoya yekgirtin û întegrasyona wan di civaka Sovyetîda bileztir bû.

Peyvên sereke:

Êzdî; kurd; Yekîtiya Sovyetê (USSR); Ermenistan; Gurcistan; binpêkirin (repressions); ruhaniya êzdiyan; koçberkirin.

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Benjamin Raßbach, *Landscapes of Resistance: Narratives around Sacred Places in Sinjar (Iraq) and the Islamic State's Genocide against the Yezidis*, Iran and the Caucasus Monographs, vol. IV (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024), 385 pages.

Raßbach's work stands as a remarkable contribution to the study of Sinjar and its Yezidi populace, offering a rich tapestry of analysis, theory, and oral tradition. As he unfolds his exploration of sacredness, he weaves together a diverse collection of folk tales and narratives – often told from differing, sometimes contradictory perspectives – that cover the mosaic of the solemn shrines in Sinjar like a colourful oriental carpet. His book presents a compelling perspective through a uniquely innovative approach, providing a narrative mapping of sacred places in Iraq's Sinjar region while critically examining their intricate role in Yezidi and Kurdish identity building processes. The author persuasively demonstrates that these sacred sites function both as catalysts for internal divisions and particularist political agendas and as symbols of a cohesive and unified Yezidi religious identity. However, this identity may be conceptualised either within or beyond the framework of Kurdishness. In this context, Raßbach observes that in recent decades, Yezidi sacred places and their associated identities have undergone significant homogenization, with exclusive and unambiguous religious interpretations gaining prominence in response to political upheavals and military conflicts. He suggests that across all Yezidi political formations, religious symbolism serves as a means to advance their respective agendas, with each faction claiming to represent the entire community.

As the author convincingly demonstrates in Part 3 of his book, narratives of divine interventions, such as the Miracle of Sherfedin, derive their authority – much like the early Greek usage of mythos – from collective memories of violence and serve to transmit accounts of heroic resistance. In this sense, they also function as communal coping mechanisms. These narratives are far from homogeneous, as different groups and

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political parties interpret and utilise them to emphasise the favouritism, they claim to have received from the holy being. Similarly, conflicts – both between Yezidis and Muslim adversaries and within the Yezidi community itself – are frequently framed in religious terms. However, beneath these religious narratives lie deeper layers of contention, particularly the long-standing rivalry between Yezidi factions affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and those aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). As the author emphasises, these conflicts often originate from historical divisions within political affiliations or tribal structures, yet they are frequently obscured in the collective memory of narrators. This phenomenon underscores that while disputes over sacred sites or objects are not necessarily rooted in religious differences, religion frequently serves as the primary framework through which they are articulated and understood.

The author's analysis of the structure and background of narratives concerning divine interventions is followed by a detailed examination of the perception of traditional sacred places, or *mazars* (as termed by his Yezidi interlocutors), and of the ways in which these perceptions are articulated through ritual practices and social relations. These places derive their significance from their association with specific Holy Beings and their deeds. The lives of these figures are often recalled in a schematic manner, with their sacredness primarily linked to their primordial presence at particular sites – an aspect that, according to Raßbach, is reflected in the architectural uniformity of Yezidi shrines today. The geographic placement of these sacred sites, frequently intertwined with natural landscape features, remains, as he emphasises, of paramount importance. Such locations serve as anchoring points for an otherwise fluid and evolving oral tradition, reinforcing the notion of an unaltered transmission of specific religious narratives. Furthermore, the analysis explores how beliefs about sacred places are not necessarily rigid; rather, their significance often lies in the rhetorics of identity, which are strategically employed in intra-community discussions. Discourses rooted in communal history and tradition have the potential to transcend politics, integrating into a broader and more inclusive religious framework of Yezidism. Raßbach also introduces a second category of shrines that seems to challenge the uniformity of Yezidi sacred buildings. These sites are tied to specific narratives and localised knowledge, often emerging from recent politically driven events. As a result, they function, according to the author, as intermediaries between standardised Yezidi *mazars* and politically affiliated sacred sites – the latter, frequently denied *mazar* status due to their recent origins.

Some sacred sites in Sinjar are particularly tied to local Yezidism, often reinforcing the religious significance of the Mountain. The author examines how these discourses

unfold within what he terms a "spatialised symbolic order of the sacred" – a framework in which the sacredness of the landscape, place-bound memory, and spatial imagery become integral to Yezidi religious identity. In this context, Raßbach analyses smaller replicas of the sacred centre of Lalish and other features of Sinjari Yezidism, highlighting the role of "conflictual mimeses" in shaping local identity. A similar, though more pronounced, dynamic he observes in the relationship between Yezidism and Islam. While many elements of Yezidi sacred sites reflect a shared historical development with Islamic traditions, these similarities are now largely understood within an emic perspective as markers of Yezidism's primordial distinction and superiority over Islam. According to the author, the ongoing tension between Sinjar and the Shekhan region, as well as between Yezidism and Islam, is reflected in the architecture and symbolism of sacred sites, continuously influencing and being influenced by contemporary political struggles.

The author argues that, whether ancient or recent, these sacred sites function as territorial claims. The graves of martyrs symbolically mark the land, echoing traditional beliefs that associate landscapes with sacred traces left by Holy Beings. The plurality and contestation of memories, traditions, and imaginaries within contemporary Yezidism are evident in ongoing discussions about sacredness. Moreover, images from the oral tradition remain deeply intertwined with the land, continuing to anchor spatial and historical imaginaries at specific sites.

Sinjar Mountain occupies a central place in both local and external perceptions of Sinjar and Iraqi Kurdistan, its enigmatic qualities in local beliefs closely tied to its strategic significance and its role in Yezidi religious thought. The present book explores sacredness as a situational and interpretative category and while scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss conceptualise sacredness as a "floating signifier", the author argues that this perspective fails to fully capture the emic significance of Yezidi sacred concepts. The distinction between religious and politically sacred sites underscores a fundamental belief that sacredness is not merely constructed in the present but must have been established in the past. By integrating constructivist and essentialist perspectives, the study aims to navigate the complexities of both emic and etic approaches to sacredness in Yezidism.

As the author further examines the evolving landscape of sacred spaces in Sinjar, particularly those shaped by political and historical upheavals rather than traditional religious frameworks (as explored in his Chapter 8 on Monuments, Martyrs, and the PKK in Sinjar), he argues that Yezidis distinguish between religiously sacred sites and those imbued with political significance. While both categories serve as commemora-

tive markers of past events, their reference points are perceived as immutable. In contrast, he argues that essentialist interpretations – such as those put forward by Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto – conceive sacred places as manifestations of an independent metaphysical reality, an approach more closely aligned with traditional Yezidi understandings of sacredness. Raßbach's study offers a nuanced analysis of how Yezidi sacred spaces are perceived, contested, and reaffirmed within shifting political and social landscapes.

He highlights how perceptions of sacred places in Sinjar reflect the broader divide between situational and essentialist approaches to sacredness. He argues that in Yezidism, a *mazar* is traditionally regarded as sacred due to its connection to the deeds of Holy Beings in a primordial or essential dimension. At the same time, he notes that certain sites, such as the Kocho school, have acquired sacredness through recent historical events, demonstrating that places can be sacralised within generational memory. According to Raßbach, both perspectives coexist in Yezidi narratives about sacred places, yet they are often framed separately within identity discourses, illustrating the tension between inherited religious tradition and the evolving significance of contemporary historical experiences.

While the author provides valuable insights into the intersection of sacred sites and political struggles, his conclusions may not fully account for regional variations. His argument that Yezidi shrines have been politically appropriated – their significance increasingly linked to recent military conflicts – is particularly evident in PKK-controlled areas and near the *mazar* of Sherfedin, where images of martyrs, political flags, and spoils of war are displayed alongside sacred sites. However, this phenomenon does not necessarily characterise Sinjar as a whole. Many sacred sites remain primarily places of religious devotion, largely unaffected by overt political symbolism. By portraying this dynamic as a widespread development, the author however risks overstating the extent to which political forces have shaped Yezidi sacred spaces, overlooking the more nuanced and varied realities on the ground.

Raßbach further observes that sites newly regarded as sacred are often narratively linked to pre-existing sacred locations, reinforcing their legitimacy. However, whether a particular individual emphasises a site's sacred character or associates it with a political party or militia is largely shaped by political affiliations, and the two designations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The author states in this context: "While Yezidis affiliated with the PKK and its allies might point out that the Şêx Mend shrine near Sherfedin is a new construction which Qasim Şeşo [a senior military commander now affiliated with the Kurdistan Regional Government, especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party] has perhaps even built for his own financial benefit, he himself would

emphasise that there had already been a certain stone associated with Şêx Mend there which then had been marked with a *qob* [domed structure] so that pilgrims can perform rituals. The perception of sacred places, no matter if they are considered traditional or not, is often situational". This reflects Raßbach's broader argument that the sacredness of a place is not an inherent or fixed quality but rather a fluid and contested category, shaped by shifting political and social dynamics.

Drawing on multiple examples, Raßbach underscores that shared experiences of violence significantly shape how sacred sites in Sinjar are understood. Within the Yezidi oral tradition, numerous accounts of conflict with outside groups serve to legitimise the sanctity of specific locations and even entire landscapes. As the author concludes, "sacred sites" in Sinjar are considered by the Yezidis as "conquered spaces" and aptly notes that narratives surrounding the Yezidis' initial presence in Sinjar and Lalish are often framed as acts of symbolic or territorial appropriation. This interpretation extends to sites connected to recent episodes of violence, particularly those linked to the genocide committed by the so-called Islamic State. Contemporary understandings of Yezidi identity frequently rest on a history marked by repeated persecution and violence at the hands of Muslims. In many of the author's interlocutors described sacredness in terms of the resting places of martyrs – individuals believed to have sacrificed their lives for the protection of the Yezidi people and their homeland. Thus, these sites, whether tied to mythic origins or recent trauma, are widely seen as key expressions of collective identity.

The author puts forward a compelling theory in his analysis of political authority in Sinjar, noting that leadership was traditionally exercised by tribal figures whose influence dominated for centuries. More recently, however, the migration of Yezidis from the Shekhan region has contributed to a shift toward institutionalised religious authority, thereby reshaping communal hierarchies. As Raßbach recalls, many Sinjari tribes historically comprised both Yezidi and Muslim segments, with especially close ties between Yezidis and Shi'a Kurds. He argues that this relatively fluid intercommunal landscape gradually gave way to more exclusive, religiously defined identities – a transformation accelerated by broader geopolitical forces. In particular, Ottoman military campaigns and British colonial policy are seen as instrumental in fostering a supra-tribal, ethno-religious Yezidi identity that increasingly positioned itself in explicit contrast to Islam. In this context, it is worth noting that the author at times refers to the Yezidis as a "Kurdish ethno-religious entity" – a characterisation that appears internally inconsistent, since he employs the label ethno-religious while simultaneously presuming a Kurdish ethnicity for the Yezidis. If Yezidis are indeed to be classified as ethnically Kurdish, they would more accurately fall under the category of a reli-

gious minority within the Kurdish population, rather than as a distinct ethno-religious group. This ambiguity reflects the broader tensions inherent in competing narratives of Yezidi identity – whether framed as a subset of Kurdishness or as an autonomous ethnos with its own religious tradition. In this regard, the author would have done well to engage more thoroughly with the extensive body of scholarship addressing the controversy surrounding Yezidi ethnic, religious, and national identity.

Turning to intra-Yezidi rivalries, Raßbach underscores how various actors in Sinjar construct their narratives within a framework of Yezidi religious identity, frequently employing a rhetoric marked by antagonism and exclusion. Competing factions frequently characterise one another not merely as political opponents, but as inherently illegitimate – framing them as instruments of external powers such as Kurdish, Turkish, or Iranian forces. These portrayals serve to delegitimise the opposing group by questioning their Yezidi credentials. At the same time, each faction asserts its own authority by claiming to represent the true will of the Yezidi community in Sinjar. As Raßbach observes, such accusations are seldom framed as ideological disagreements; rather, they draw on narratives that portray the opposing side as alien to – or complicit in compromising – the Yezidi faith, thereby reinforcing claims to communal authenticity and political legitimacy. He further observes that narratives surrounding the genocide perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State often stress the exclusively Yezidi character of those who took up arms in defence of the community. Military contributions by other factions are either downplayed as insignificant or framed as self-serving political manoeuvres. Within this discursive context, the deployment of religious language serves a particular function: it marks individuals, sites, and actions as emblematic of communal unity, while implicitly distancing them from factional or partisan agendas.

In conclusion, Raßbach's study constitutes a significant contribution to the anthropological study of religion, particularly through its nuanced examination of the interplay between material space and sacrality in the Sinjar region. Throughout the work, the author adopts a dual methodological lens – analysing the material and spatial configurations of sacred places while simultaneously engaging with emic conceptions and translating them into broader theoretical frameworks. Drawing on recent scholarly debates that emphasise the entanglement of religious meaning-making with political, economic, and social realities, the author anchors Yezidi religious discourses within the everyday experiences and structural conditions of Sinjar's communities. This integrative approach not only enriches the understanding of Yezidi sacred geography but also affirms the relevance of classical and contemporary anthropological concepts in the study of lived religion. By engaging both contemporary theorists and classical thinkers – most notably critical geographers and Émile Durkheim – Raßbach concep-

tualises the boundary between the sacred and the profane not as fixed or inherent, but as the outcome of socially embedded processes of ritualisation and symbolic negotiation. In his account, sacred spaces emerge through generational acts of interpretation and ceremonial practice that inscribe meaning onto the landscape. These sites are not exclusively religious in function; rather, they serve as dense social nodes where memory, territorial belonging, and communal identity converge. Particularly in narratives surrounding the genocide, Yezidi shrines function as spatial embodiments of collective trauma and resilience – simultaneously sites of remembrance, social interaction, and political articulation. In this way, the author affirms the continued analytical relevance of categories such as "religion" and "sacred space", while also demonstrating how these concepts are locally constituted, contested, and redefined through lived experience. Raßbach also underscores the importance of emic conceptions of sacred spaces, particularly how local actors invoke memories of violent encounters and heroic resistance to frame their significance. By juxtaposing essentialist and situational perspectives, the study demonstrates that these approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary analytical tools. Together, they allow for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding sacred places. The symbolic and political dimensions of sacred space in the Sinjari context are shown to be deeply interwoven – mutually constitutive forces that shape both the lived experience and the representation of these sites.

While a detailed engagement with the methodological challenges of studying oral societies is not beyond the scope of this review, it must be set aside due to the limited space typically allocated for book reviews, is important to note that Raßbach addresses these issues with commendable precision. He persuasively argues that, despite ongoing efforts at canonisation and the homogenising pressures of globalisation, the Yezidi oral tradition remains vibrant, dynamic, and markedly heterogeneous. Its unfixed and evolving nature resists rigid codification. As the author emphasises, any initiative aimed at formalising or systematising this oral heritage must be situated within the broader context of contested claims to religious and cultural authority.

Raßbach has undoubtedly authored a work that deserves a place on the shelf of anyone seriously engaged with the study of Yezidism – and especially those seeking a deeper understanding of the Yezidis of Sinjar.

Contributors

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Janelle Carlson is an independent researcher focusing on human rights, genocide studies, and post-conflict justice. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in 2016 from the University of South Dakota, where she developed an interest in minority rights and responses to mass violence. Her undergraduate thesis analyzed international reactions to Yezidi persecution. Janelle pursued a Master's degree at the University of Bayreuth in Germany, completing it in 2023. Her MA thesis examined the 2014 Yezidi genocide by ISIS in Sinjar, emphasising survivor narratives and transitional justice. She has published peer-reviewed articles and essays on minority persecution and global legal frameworks. Janelle's writing connects scholarly research with public advocacy to influence policy discussions. Her current research explores human rights, mass atrocity prevention, and food security in conflict zones. She collaborates with NGOs, academic institutions, and survivor communities to support justice efforts. Email: elle.karlsan@ gmail.com

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