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## Policy Brief

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### *Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination: Yezidis in the New Iraq*

By Sebastian Maisel

#### **Executive Summary**

*On August 14, 2007, in the largest single terror attack during the war in Iraq, over 350 Yezidis were killed and two entire villages completely destroyed, leaving over 1,000 families homeless. The two villages, Qahtaniya and Jazeera are located in the Sinjar Mountains, an area in northwestern Iraq that is hotly contested by Sunni Arab insurgents, Kurdish peshmergas, US-led coalition forces, and several minority groups.*

*The Sinjar region, which is home to the majority of the approximately 500,000 Iraqi Yezidis, belongs to the Niniveh Governorate and therefore not to one of the three Kurdish provinces. The Yezidis, who are Kurds,<sup>1</sup> speak the Kurmanji dialect. Unlike the predominantly Muslim Kurds, however, Yezidis follow a different religious tradition, one that dates to pre-Islamic times.*

*Since large groups of Iraqi Christians have fled the country, the Yezidis have now become the largest non-Muslim minority in Iraq. Information about their existence and current situation has come to the attention of the international community by reports from embedded journalists, who often have given the Yezidis of Iraq a voice for their concerns for the first time.<sup>2</sup> Other information has been gathered from the few scholars and researchers who have conducted fieldwork among the Iraqi Yezidis.<sup>3</sup>*

*One of the many negative attributes that are laid upon the Yezidi community is*

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1. Although the majority of the community as well as most scholars agree on the Kurdish ethnicity, some Yezidis dispute this notion, claiming a unique Yezidi identity that predates the Kurdish origin.

2. See *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 10, 2003; *Egypt Today*, December 2005; *Dallas Morning News*, November 4, 2007.

3. For example Irene Dulz, Christine Allison, Eszter Spät, and others.

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## Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination: Yezidis in the New Iraq

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*the issue of heresy based upon the often cited stereotype of alleged devil-worship. Others cite the Hadith, according to which heretics should be punished with death for abandoning their religion. Because the current conflict in Iraq has turned into a sectarian battle, Yezidis find themselves in the middle of a violent campaign that could lead to possible extermination or expulsion from their ancestral homeland.*

*Leaving aside issues related to the US-led invasion and the overall change in Iraq, several important questions are raised in this article, focusing on this specific group as an example of unilateral transition under the new system. What happened to the Yezidis after the fall of Saddam's regime? Do they have a future in the wider geographical area? Can this ancient faith protect itself, or can it be protected in the wake of an escalating conflict over resources, territory, and religious hegemony? How do Yezidis adapt to political, social, and religious challenges?*

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The Yezidis are a very small ethnic-religious minority, who, due to the drawing of political borders in the aftermath of World War I, were spread over several Middle Eastern countries. All Yezidis speak as their native language a form of the northern Kurdish language known as Kurmanji; in addition they often speak the language of their “host” country, i.e. Arabic in Iraq<sup>1</sup> and Syria, Armenian in Armenia, and German in Germany. However, although most Yezidis consider themselves ethnic Kurds, some communities, particularly in Armenia and the Sinjar Mountains, want to be regarded as Yezidis — as a distinct ethnicity with their own Yezidi language.

The largest group of Yezidis (approximately 400,000)<sup>2</sup> lives in northern Iraq, which is also home to their main sanctuaries and places of pilgrimage. Other communities are found in Armenia (50,000) and Georgia (10,000); Yezidis have recently migrated in large numbers to Germany (40,000) in order to claim political asylum. Relatively small groups still survive in Syria, while the Yezidis of Turkey have almost completely left their traditional living areas and moved to Germany.

In Iraq until 2003, most Yezidis lived in areas that were controlled by the Iraqi government in Baghdad, while only 10% enjoyed relative freedom in the Kurdish-controlled province of Dahuk. Their main living areas include the Sinjar mountain range, and the Sheikhan region around the city of Ain Sifni, as well as the twin cities of Bahzani and Bashiqa near Mosul. The community's main sanctuary, the temple and shrine of Shaykh Adi bin Musafir at Lalish, was located within the Kurdish Autonomy Zone. Yezidis from all areas are called upon to gather at Lalish for their largest religious festival, the *cejna jemaya*, or the Holiday of Assembly. Due to its location behind the Iraqi-Kurdish armistice line, it was very difficult for most Yezidis to attend the festival. Due to increasing terror threats and attacks, the festival has been cancelled several times recently, or has witnessed a very low turnout.

However, all Yezidi areas were subject to heavy Arabization policies carried out by the Iraqi government in the 1970s and 1980s, which forced the local Kurdish popula-

1. The Yezidis in Bahzani and Bashiqa as well as some groups in Sinjar use Arabic as their first language and Kurmanji for their religious texts and prayers.

2. Estimates on the number of Yezidis vary greatly; however, they are typically cited as numbering one to two percent of the total Iraqi population.



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tion to leave their villages and to live in several *mujammas*, collective towns in the plains far away from their fields and villages in the mountains. Their villages were then either destroyed or given to loyal Sunni Arab tribes.<sup>3</sup> Until recently, the return to their homeland has not been facilitated; most of the Yazidis have continued living in *mujammas* like Qahtaniya or Jazeera. While the majority of Yazidis still inhabit the villages or collective towns, some smaller communities are also found in the larger cities of the north, such as Dahuk or Mosul. There, they lack the cohesion of a strong community that is necessary for survival in the current ethno-religious conflict.

### RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Yezidi religious tradition is portrayed as a developing monotheistic and syncretic system that includes ritual and doctrinal aspects similar to other major religions in the area, such as baptism, pilgrimage, and various taboos. In their genesis and theology, many signs and myths of pre-Islamic and ancient Iranian origin are clearly recognizable. Other narratives link Yezidism to the Zoroastrians and earlier Mesopotamian religions. Their veneration for Tausi Melek, the Peacock Angel,<sup>4</sup> and subsequent alienation from the religious majority led to the unjust accusation of worshipping the devil. Yazidis believe in one God, the creator, who passed on commands to seven angels and their leader Tausi Melek. Later, during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century, the community was exposed to the teaching and organizational reforms of Shaykh Adi bin Musafir,<sup>5</sup> a Sufi mystic who strengthened the hierarchical system of clerics and laymen. Certainly since then the religion appears closed to outsiders with no conversion of proselytes permitted.

Among the important basic features of the religion are beliefs, myths, texts, and social rituals. But, what makes a Yezidi a faithful Yezidi? Most noticeable for the individual is to find their place in the society, which means for every Yezidi to know the social group that he or she belongs to. All Yazidis belong either to the caste of clergy (*shaykh* or *pir*) or to the caste of the laymen (*murid*), which are hereditary and separated from each other, resembling Sufi tradition. Reflecting other common Islamic practice, Yazidis follow five basic pillars (*penc ferzen heqiqete*), which are considered indispensable for the sheer existence of a Yezidi community. They include the recognition of five spiritual mentors (*osta, sheikh, pir, mirebi, biraye axrete*), who instruct and supervise the religious passage of every Yezidi. Additionally, three general socio-religious principles apply to all Yazidis: *sheriet*, marriage is permitted only to other Yazidis; *teriqet*, marriage is permitted only to members of your own socio-religious group (caste); and *derba kherqe shekhadi nede*, respecting religious authority.

Yezidi culture and religion are transmitted orally. Traditionally, Yazidis were not only illiterate, but often described as hostile toward literary education. Until the 1950s, only members of the Adani Shaykh group were permitted to learn how to read and write in order to protect the religion and its sacred, hidden meanings from outsiders, and probably to maintain the position of the religious leadership. In contrast to the rich Islamic and Christian literary movement of the medieval ages, it appears that oral transmission was the sanctioned form of religious instruction.<sup>6</sup>

Formal religious instruction in this orally oriented society has been restricted to certain groups and lineages from among the clergy; therefore, for the ordinary Yezidi, the marriage restrictions are the most obvious and influential

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3. George Black, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds* (Human Rights Watch, 1993), pp. 112-117.

4. On Tausi Melek see Philip G. Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism, its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition* (Lewiston: Lampeter, 1995); Garnik Asatrian and Victoria Arakelova, "Malak Tawus: The Peacock Angel of the Yazidis," *Iran and the Caucasus*, Vol. 7, Nos. 1-2 (2003), pp. 1-36.

5. On Shaykh Adi see Zourabi Aloinae: "The reconstruction of Shayh 'Adi b. Musafir's biography on the basis of Arabic and Kurdish sources," *The Arabist*, Budapest Studies in Arabic, Vol. 18, No. 2 (September 1995), pp. 95-104; Rudolf Frank, *Scheich 'Adi, der große Heilige der Jezidis* (Berlin: Türkische Bibliothek Nr. 14, 1911); Nicolas Siouffi, "Notice sur le Chéikh 'Adi et la secte des Yézidis," *Journal Asiatique*, Series 8, Vol. 5 (1885), pp. 78-98.

6. Christine Allison, *The Yezidi oral tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 47.

that relate to daily life. In addition, Yezidi *murids* need to know about rituals, taboos, and the general way of the rites of passage. As Spät observes, “Unless driven by rare curiosity about spiritual matters, a Yezidi layman’s familiarity with the religious teachings of his people is negligibly small. It consists of what he may happen to remember of the myths and their interpretations by the *qewels* and other holy men, and what little he understands of the sacred hymns with their obsolete Kurdish texts interspersed with innumerable Arabic expressions.”<sup>7</sup>

### POLITICAL HISTORY

The early history of the Yazidis in Iraq until the July revolution of 1958 is discussed in detail by several authors.<sup>8</sup> During the Ottoman Empire, Yazidis were subject to massive persecution and discrimination that continued during the era of Arab, Turkish, and Russian nationalism as well as during the present time of Islamic revitalization. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the region that was inhabited by predominantly Kurdish groups, and among them several large Yezidi blocks, was arbitrarily divided by the treaties of Lausanne (1923) and Ankara (1926). Border lines cut through Yezidi territory and separated the communities in the Turkish Tur Abdin area and the Syrian Jezirah from the community’s heartland. This fostered the semi-independent development of those groups with only limited exchange and contact, and they developed a sense of identity dependent on internal communal arrangements. In their respective territories, the now smaller and weaker Yezidi communities dropped to the bottom end of the social hierarchy and were quickly pushed aside in the struggle to secure oil resources and strategic position in the region.<sup>9</sup> The Iraqi government tried to strip the Yazidis of their ethnic identity and distance them from the Kurdish community by declaring them to be descendants of the Arab Umayyad dynasty.<sup>10</sup> The patronym “Yezidis,” they explained, derived from their fellowship with Yazid bin Mu’awiya, the second caliph of this dynasty, who earned his reputation as the murderer of Husayn bin ‘Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and leader of the Shi’ite community. However, very few Yazidis (who joined the Ba’th Party in order to go to university or to pursue a career) accepted this classification; the majority never gave up their legitimate claims of Kurdishness.

The forced Arabization policy reached its peak in 1987-88 during the Anfal Campaign. Most Yazidis were then relocated to the *mujammas* and became completely dependent on supplies and basic services provided (or often not provided) by the central government. Almost the entire community lived in a state of poverty and illiteracy. Unemployment is still so common that no one bothers to find accurate numbers. Many Yazidis tried, but only a few succeeded, in fleeing the area and seeking asylum in foreign countries, predominantly Germany.<sup>11</sup>

From the beginning of the war in 2003, the Kurds in general and the Yazidis in particular welcomed and supported the coalition forces, hoping that the fall of Saddam’s regime would bring security, prosperity, and recognition. Also, since the beginning of the sectarian warfare in the middle of 2004, the political and security situation of the Yazidis has deteriorated steadily, and the number of attacks against them has increased dramatically, especially in the Nineveh Province. Those events were hardly mentioned in the local or international press. The interest of the media is focused more on the Sunni-Shi’ite conflict than on the relatively calm situation in the Kurdish territories. Unlike

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7. Eszter Spät, *The Yazidis* (London: Saqi, 2006), p. 34.

8. John S. Guest, *Survival among the Kurds: A History of the Yazidis* (London: Keegan Paul, 1993); Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999).

9. See Nelida Fuccaro, “Ethnicity, State Formation and Conscription in Postcolonial Iraq: the Case of the Yazidi Kurds of Jabal Sinjar,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1997), pp. 559-580 and Nelida Fuccari, “Communalism and the State in Iraq: The Yazidi Kurds, c.1869-1940,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (April 1999), pp. 1-12.

10. Izady Mehrdad, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1992), p. 157.

11. See Irene Dulz, *Die Yaziden im Irak: Zwischen Musterdorf und Vertreibung* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2001).

other involved groups, such as the Christian exile community or neighboring Sunni countries, the Yezidis have no institutionalized lobby that could bring the current disaster to the attention of the wider world. Therefore, in order to illustrate the systematic campaign against the Yezidis, it seems imperative to describe several of the key attacks against them.<sup>12</sup> The attacks include killings, kidnappings, intimidations, and public campaigns to convert or kill them, as well as political and economic trespasses. Various attacks were directed against the political leadership of the community, such as Mir Tahsin Beg, Pir Mamo Othman, and the few local Yezidi representatives. The educated elite is often threatened with attacks or intimidated by kidnappings of family members.

- In March of 2004, flyers were distributed in Mosul calling for divine rewards for those who kill Yezidis.
- On August 17, 2004, Fadi Ayed Khidr, a young child from Bashiqa, was executed.
- The leader of the Yezidi community, Mir Tahsin Beg, was targeted in September 2004 in Aif Sifni, but survived the bomb attack.
- The imam of the local mosque in Sheikhan on October 1, 2004, called on all Yezidis to convert to Islam or else they would face severe punishments.
- During Ramadan in October 2004, two Yezidis from Sinjar, Hazim Shingali and Sulaiman Farso, were killed because they smoked a cigarette in front of Muslims.
- A letter was found next to the corpse of Qasim Khalaf RASHU, who was killed in August 2004, saying that he was slain because he was an infidel. Qasim had worked at a store for luxury goods and accessories. Others have been attacked for working in the alcohol business.<sup>13</sup>
- Five Yezidis from Sinjar were killed on December 8, 2004.
- Pir Mamo Othman, former Minister without Portfolio, was attacked in July 2005 and one of his bodyguards was killed.
- Hindi Haji Alo, who had an alcohol store in Baghdad, was kidnapped and tortured in August of 2005.
- On November 1, 2005, Yezidi workers on the road between Mosul and Sinjar were attacked leaving six dead and three wounded.
- After the honor killing of a Yezidi girl who had converted to Islam, Sunni Kurds and Arabs in the area demanded that the alleged killers be handed over. Otherwise, they threatened, “we will never let any Yezidi breathe the air,” according to some flyers. On April 22, 2007, a bus carrying migrant workers to Mosul was stopped and all 23 Yezidis were lined up against the wall and executed.<sup>14</sup>

Usually, these attacks were hardly recognized, if ever investigated. Although according to the constitution it is the mandate of the Iraqi government and its local and regional authorities to protect religious minorities and their

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12. For a complete list of anti-Yezidi attacks, see Eva Savelsberg and Siamend Hajo, *Gutachten zur Situation der Yeziden im Irak*, Court Teport, M 27 K 04.50497, Munich, Germany; Yezidisches Forum, *Menschenrechtssituation der Yeziden im Irak* (Oldenburg, Germany, December 12, 2004), and Irene Dulz, Siamend Hajo, and Eva Savelsberg, “*Verfolgt und Umworben: Die Yeziden im Neuen Irak*,” *Kurdische Studien*, Vols. 4 and 5 (2004/2005), pp. 91-107; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “UNHCR’s eligibility guidelines for assessing the international protection needs of Iraqi asylum-seekers” (Geneva, August 2007).

13. Many Iraqi towns had so-called *gazinios* (pubs) which were run by either Christians or Yezidis. Most of them had to shut down under pressure from Islamic organizations.

14. *The New York Times*, April 23, 2007

religious freedom, the reality looks rather different. The two main Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) recognize the Yezidis only if it suits their political interest, such as expanding the Kurdish sphere of influence into neighboring provinces or in upcoming elections. The mentioning of the Yezidis in the Iraqi constitution has to be viewed from this perspective.

Political and religious leaders of the Yezidi community in Iraq and in the Diaspora initiated an informal meeting between Mir Tahsin Beg, the leader of the community, Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the then-president of Iraq Ghazi Yawar,<sup>15</sup> with the objective to sanction the Yezidis in the draft constitution as a protected, recognized minority. The earlier misspelling of the group's name that resembled a Shi'ite group from Yemen has now been corrected.<sup>16</sup> But, apart from the temporary appointment (as Minister without Portfolio) of Pir Mamo Othman, a well-educated Yezidi from the clergy class who lived in exile in Germany, no other significant political gains have been made. Local Yezidi representatives were ignored and often barred from attending important meetings.<sup>17</sup> City and village councils rarely include Yezidi members. Requests for a quota of representatives have not been recognized, while during the elections in January of 2005, Yezidi voters faced significant interference and discrimination, and many of them were locked out of the election process.<sup>18</sup> Here again, it becomes obvious that support from the Kurdish parties is not granted wholeheartedly and on the basis of common Kurdishness, but for political benefits.

The KDP, which controls most of the Yezidi areas in Iraq, follows a two-fold approach toward the Yezidis: They promote the distinct Kurdish origin of the Yezidis and portray them as their ethnic brothers, and they invest significant amounts of money in the cultural and religious activities of the group. For example, the party pays the salaries of the employees of the Lalish Cultural Center, a mother organization with branches in most Yezidi towns. Leading members of the Center are also KDP members. Generally, an atmosphere of dependency and patronage is created which hinders the development of independent Yezidi political groups. Yezidis in the Sinjar region in particular are keen on maintaining an independent position — in some cases a special Yezidi identity. The KDP has tried to influence public opinion to force the creation of a greater sense of common Kurdish identity that does not recognize the unique character of the Yezidis. The number of Yezidis that are discontented with the current Kurdish rule is growing steadily, and numerous voices both from abroad and the Sinjar can be heard demanding the recognition of a separate Yezidi identity, different in religion and ethnicity.<sup>19</sup>

### SOCIAL CONDITIONS

While a few families have tried to return to their old villages, the majority of Yezidis remain in the *mujammas*. Despite harsh living conditions and unemployment, they often have no alternative. The leading political party, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Masud Barzani, is the only investor in, employer, and protector of the community. Many young Yezidis join the party's military apparatus as the only possible source of income. Generally, people become frustrated with the slow process of stabilizing and reconstructing Yezidi areas. Although Yezidis have welcomed coalition forces with open arms and granted much support (serving as translators and in other capacities), they feel that their commitment is not rewarded in the same way as the support of Muslim Kurds. Yezidi villages are the last to receive new schools, roads, electricity, or protection, while other Muslim towns, both Arabic and Kurdish, began to recover

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15. The author was part of the steering committee that drafted the Yezidi correspondence between the two parties.

16. See [http://mawtani.com/ar/information/documents/content/Constitution\\_Ar.pdf](http://mawtani.com/ar/information/documents/content/Constitution_Ar.pdf); paragraph 1, section 2 mentions the Yezidis in their correct Arabic spelling: *al-Izidiyun*.

17. Decisive events without Yezidi participation include the conferences of the Iraqi Opposition in London (2002) and 'Arbil (2003), the appointment of the provisional Iraqi government council (2003), and the conference of national reconciliation in 'Arbil (2004).

18. According to international observers, the votes of some 300,000, mostly Yezidis, Assyrians, and Turkomans, were not included in the count.

19. See letter of Canadian Yezidis to world leaders at [http://www.yeziditruth.org/yezidi\\_voices](http://www.yeziditruth.org/yezidi_voices); Spät, *The Yezidis*, p. 85.

much faster with the help of US support.

Among the many misunderstandings about Yezidis is the widespread belief that they are against formal education and they do not permit their children to attend schools. Educating your children is forbidden? How is this possible in a region that always strived to obtain more knowledge, and which played such an important part in the transmission of current knowledge? In the Middle East, religious education, organized along confessional lines, is crucial for shaping the identity of young believers from the various religious communities. Throughout modern history, these communities — whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish — enjoyed great autonomy in educating the younger generation. Following the Islamic tradition of protecting people of the book, all *millets* (confessional communities) carry out their own specific way of religious instruction, often in their indigenous languages, hoping that this helps the students to retain their cultural and religious identity. Groups who were not part of the *millet* system, however, encountered numerous attempts of official (political) and unofficial (religious, cultural) intrusion, not only on their doctrine and rituals, but on their method of teaching religious knowledge to the children.

In the centuries before World War II when education in general was not encouraged among Yezidis, some would go so far as to say that attending school was forbidden. The only exception to the rule was for the well-off Shaykh families,<sup>20</sup> who could afford to send their children to the few public or missionary schools. Only a few religious leaders could read and write at this time. The first educated Yezidi woman was Wansa, member of the princely family and wife of Mir Said Beg, then ruler of the Yezidis. Subsequently, she shot her husband and fled, which led many to despise female education.

E.S. Drower, however, witnessed an increase in formal, public education, observing many boys in Bashiqa attending the local elementary school. Some went on to secondary school. She also mentioned Yezidi school-masters in Sinjar and Sheikhan, obviously much to the dislike of many Yezidi parents who feared that their children would abandon the traditional lifestyle and religion if they attended school.<sup>21</sup>

Since the formation of Iraq, Yezidis have faced long periods of denial of their Kurdishness and Yezidi religion because the Iraqi regime forcefully declared them Arabs. Although the Iraqi constitution in theory granted freedom of religion and Yezidis were not forced to attend Islamic classes, they also were not allowed to establish Yezidi religious classes. However, the autonomy law for the Kurdish provinces in 1974 enabled the Kurds and Yezidis to teach in their mother tongue at school in areas where Kurds were the majority of the population. As for areas which encountered heavy Arabization policies, such as Kirkuk or Sinjar, the use of minority languages such as Kurdish, Aramaic, or Turkish was prohibited.<sup>22</sup>

With the establishment of the Kurdish Autonomy Zone in 1992, newly gained liberties for the Kurds enabled Yezidi activists to found cultural centers and publish textbooks for Yezidi religious classes in Kurmanji with Latin script as well as Arabic. The Kurdish parties granted temporary and selected support for Yezidi education. Within the Kurdish areas, religious classes for Yezidis were offered in villages with large Yezidi populations, such as Derebin, Ba'adhre, Khaniq, and Sharya. In the elementary school of Sharya, approximately 1,000 Yezidi students are taught in Kurmanji. From grade one to four, three classes are offered per week, and in grades five and six, two classes.<sup>23</sup> The Kurdish government covered the costs for printing the teaching material and textbooks. In 2002, textbooks for grades one to six were available, and were in preparation for higher grades. But for the majority living outside the safe haven,

20. For the internal breakdown of the shaykh class, see Chaukeddin Issa, *Das Yezidentum — Religion und Leben* (Oldenburg: Denge Ezidiyan, 2008), pp. 80-83.

21. E. S. Drower, *Peacock Angel: Being some account of a secret cult and their sanctuaries* (London: J. Murray, 1941), p. 3.

22. Dulz, *Die Yeziden im Irak*, p. 97.

23. See Irene Dulz, "Yeziden — Eine doppelte Minderheit im Irak," *Der Schlepper*, Vol. 18 (May 2002), pp. 27-28.

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their villages suffered from a lack of schools and other educational infrastructure. For example, in Jazeera, with a population of 25,000, there were only two elementary schools in which six teachers took care of 1,000 students. There was no secondary school.<sup>24</sup>

After including the sacred Lalish valley into the autonomy zone, Yazidi activists established another cultural center with the help of the KDP. However, the Arabization policies continued to affect the educational system, and therefore had a huge impact on the Yazidis, since approximately 90% of the Yazidis lived outside the Kurdish safe haven. Most of them were now denied access to the shrines and other holy places in Lalish, and pilgrimages, an important ritual aspect of Yazidism, were no longer allowed. Until 1991, the Iraqi government outlawed Yazidi schools but, short of Kurdish allies, relented after the Gulf War. This up-and-down, inconsistent policy which served only their interest became evident in 1997, when two Yazidi teachers from al-Qush were arrested by Saddam's intelligence services and tortured until they agreed to stop teaching the Yazidi religion.

Under the new Iraqi government, things have not changed regarding official Yazidi religious classes in Sheikhan and Sinjar, the areas outside the former autonomous zone. The language of instruction in public schools is still Arabic, although the KDP is trying to spread its influence in these areas, especially with regard to culture and language. The central issue is related to the question of whether the area will become an administrative part of the Kurdish region, i.e. Dahuk province, or if it will remain within the Arab dominated province of Nineveh.

Living, working, and social conditions of the Yazidis are extremely difficult. Many lack formal education and are unemployed. The Yazidi organizations, in their attempts to improve and develop the current situation, do not enjoy the same support from the regional and provincial government as they do in the Kurdish region. The story, however, reads differently when talking to Yazidis from Sinjar, who claim that their children want to learn Arabic, but lack the choice because of the proliferation of Kurdish-language schools funded by the dominant Kurdish political parties. The KDP has hired 1,200 teachers and rented school buildings and water tanks. They also gave money to the poor and needy. Desperate for help, the Yazidi villages often welcome Kurdish funds for refurbishing their schools; in return, the villages vote for the Kurdish alliance in the elections.<sup>25</sup>

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Among the most recent legislative changes in Iraq, two new Directorates of Education were created: one for the Turkomans and one for the Assyrians, but none for the Yazidis. These new directorates were responsible for the administration of educational programs for these minority communities. Education was offered in the Turkish and Assyrian languages. A special project continued to translate and print textbooks and other educational resource materials in these languages. Only through special curricula were religious educational programs for Yazidi children authorized, clearly a disadvantageous and unequal treatment of the Yazidi community. It should be noted that this supplementary curriculum was studied across the Kurdish region and at all educational levels to the fourth preparatory class.

While most of the religious liturgy and the common language of nearly all Yazidis is Kurmanji, the inhabitants of the twin towns of Bahzani and Bashiqa in Iraq speak an Arabic dialect that is very close to Lebanese Arabic. They claim to have migrated to the Baqaa Valley in Lebanon and later returned with the reformer Shaykh Adi in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. To add to the regional difference, the people of Bahzani and Bashiqa also consider the other Yazidi communities less educated and traditional, particularly with regards to the position of women in the community, thus avoiding marital relations with Yazidis from outside. In religious matters, the special religious group of the *qewals* comes from this area. *Qewals* are guardians and transmitters of the religious texts, myths, and songs. They travel around the Yazidi communities to perform ceremonies and instruct the local population. According to local tradition, a *qewal* train-

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24. Report by Christian Peacemaker Teams in Iraq, September 25, 2005.

25. *The Washington Post*, December 27, 2005, p. A19.

ing school (*medrese*) used to exist here some 80 years ago, but *qewals* are now trained individually or during regular sessions, where elder *qewals* teach the novices.<sup>26</sup> For most of the time, this was the only religious education provided to Yezidis in general. As with all other sacred texts, the information was passed on orally; the young *qewals* had to memorize the lyrics, melodies, and rhymes. Not every Yezidi from the group of the *qewal* is eligible to perform this duty. Those who are eligible to have to comply with three general conditions: knowledge of the doctrine, volubility and sonorous voice, and playing the sacred instruments, the *def* (tambourine) and *shibab* (flute).

After the student has mastered the music, he is introduced to the religious texts. Fully trained, he is able to recite all-important psalms, myths, prayers, songs, and other texts. The training in the texts follows a certain order: First the prayers, texts related to death, *beyts* concerning religious duties, texts for the ceremonies at Lalish, the lyrics of the songs, and finally, the selective interpretation of religious texts. Nowadays, the position and reputation of the *qewals* has undergone significant changes, where dedicated *murids* often replace the *qewals* in terms of explaining the meaning of sacred texts. Plus, the number of *qewals* from Bahzani and Bashiqa is diminishing rapidly, due to age and lack of interest among the young generation.

However, several attempts have been made to revive the tradition of religious education for the interested layman. Since the 1960s, several religious schools have been founded to teach young children the essentials of Yezidi religion. Due to political pressure from the Iraqi government these schools had to be closed shortly after their opening. With the creation of the Kurdish Autonomy Zone in 1992 and increased protection and stability, the Malak Faxredin School was founded by Falah Hasan in Bashiqa, and several classes graduated over the years. At the same time in Bahzani, Shex Khalaf Abdu founded Lalish School with similar success, graduating many students. Among the educational goals are religious education and Kurdish language classes. A new school building was opened in 1998, and in 2002 approximately 200 students were enrolled at Lalish School. The curriculum includes classes in elementary religious practices such as memorizing prayers, hymns, and other texts, and ritual studies, where the students learn about Yezidi holidays, fasting, pilgrimages, and how to behave when visiting sacred places and people. General ethics and rules are taught in order to provide the students with necessary communal behavior skills, and include commands to respect parents and authorities, to be clean and healthy, and to speak the truth. Arabic has replaced Kurdish as the main language of instruction, although *qewals* and prayers are still recited in Kurdish. In contrast to Islamic Qu'ran schools, Yezidi classes are integrated by gender; no separation in the curriculum or classroom was noticed.

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**Religious extremism combined with political and economic ambitions is increasingly directed against religious minorities, particularly against the Yezidis.**

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### CONCLUSION

The common goal of the new Iraqi government — that all ethnic and religious groups of the country have their representation within the political system — has failed. The protection of minority groups, however, can be viewed as an indicator of the development of a democratic society in Iraq. Religious extremism combined with political and economic ambitions is increasingly directed against religious minorities, particularly against the Yezidis. Unlike Christians, they are generally not recognized as a protected minority, which has led to massive persecution in areas without strong and stable authorities.

Due to the unilateral renaissance of traditional Islamic values for the majority of the Iraqi population, the ongoing security problems, the growing radicalization of conservative Muslims, as well as the continuing violent fighting over political hegemony in Iraq, Yezidis face infringements, threats, attacks, and other negative effects on their daily lives. Appeals by local politicians, religious leaders, and international observers have called for practical measures to

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26. See P.G. Kreyenbroek and K.J. Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2005), p. 7.

protect Yazidis.

The implementation of three crucial political demands might contribute to this goal. First, the protection and legal rights of the Yazidis should be embedded in the Iraqi constitution. Areas with a predominant Yazidi population, such as Sinjar and Sheikhan, as well as Bahzani and Bashiqa, should be mandated to the Kurdish regional government and incorporated into the Kurdish provinces.<sup>27</sup> Second, the Yazidis should be offered a permanent seat in both the Iraqi National Parliament and the Kurdish Regional Parliament in order to represent the community and as a demonstration of the commitment by the new Iraqi government to grant legal rights and protection to their minorities. Third, the Yazidis' religious representation — lost as a result of the dissolution of the former Ministry of Religious Affairs and establishment of three separate departments for the religious affairs of Sunnis, Shi'ites, and Christians — should be restored.

To promote or simply practice the Yazidi religion can have fatal consequences. While in areas with larger Yazidi communities a fragile coexistence endures, in areas with smaller communities Yazidis are forced to hide their religion, flee the region,<sup>28</sup> or surrender to the attacks of radical Muslim terrorists and their supporters. Without international intervention, the survival of one of the oldest religious communities in the Middle East is very uncertain.

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27. Again, some Yazidi groups in Sinjar object to this particular request fearing the loss of autonomy in relation to the Kurdish parties.

28. As of November 2006, all Yazidi families except for 10-15 have left the city of Mosul. See UNHCR's eligibility guidelines (2007), pp. 80-81.