

KURDWATCH●Report 7

Yazidi in Syria

Between acceptance and marginalization



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The Yazidi are a small religious minority that primarily defines itself as Kurdish and whose members come from Turkey, Iraq and Syria. As a result of borders drawn after the First World War, the originally cohesive settlement areas were divided among three states. Due to massive persecution, especially in the 1980s, hardly any Yazidi currently reside in Turkey—many of them fled to Europe, primarily to Germany.¹ After the fall of the Ba‘th regime the situation of the Yazidi in Iraq—particularly in cities like Mosul and Baghdad, but also in Sinjar—has become significantly more acute.² In contrast, only a few institutions make a similarly critical assessment of the situation of the Yazidi in Syria.³ Generally Syria is considered one of the few Muslim states in the Middle East in which religious minorities—especially the various Christian groups—possess extensive rights. In fact, Article 35 of the Syrian constitution guarantees religious freedom, as long as the practice of religion does not disturb the public order. Restrictions exist insofar as the president must be of Muslim faith and Islamic law remains a significant source of legislative power (Article 3).

But does this religious freedom also apply to the Yazidi minority? Or does the Syrian state persecute Yazidi on the basis of their faith? Can Yazidi live their faith in public? What is the relationship between the Muslim majority and the Yazidi minority? Following a brief introduction on the basics of the Yazidi faith and remarks on the Yazidi settlement areas in Syria, this report will attempt to answer these and similar questions.

1 Sternberg-Spohr 1988; Hajo & Savelsberg 2001.

2 Dulz et al. 2004; 2009.

3 One of these is the Yazidi Forum in Oldenburg (Germany)—see Yezi-disches Forum 2009: 1.

Religious principles of Yazidism

Although the majority of the Yazidi define themselves as Kurdish, the relationship between Yazidi and Muslim Kurds is marked by mistrust. Many Muslims consider the Malak Taus (Peacock Angel)—the highest of the seven angels who rule the world and a key figure of the Yazidi faith—to be a personification of the devil.⁴ Accordingly, the Yazidi are seen as »devil worshippers«. Moreover, Yazidism is based primarily on oral tradition, thus, in contrast to Islam and Christianity, it is not recognized as a religion of the book. In this respect, the Yazidi are not covered by the Muslim commandment of protection. Finally, some Muslims do not consider the Yazidi to be simply »non-believers«, but rather apostates, in other words, Muslims who have gone astray. In fact, it is largely accepted in the scholarly literature that Shaykh ‘Adi ibn Musafir (born between 1073 and 1078, died between 1160 and 1163), considered as founder or reformer of Yazidism, was an orthodox Sufi shaykh. It was only under the leadership of Shaykh Hasan ibn ‘Adi, nearly one hundred years after Shaykh ‘Adi ibn Musafir’s death, that his supporters began increasingly to turn away from Islamic norms and integrate pre-Islamic religions into their faith.⁵

A rigid cast system that separates the Yazidi into *murids* (lay people), *pirs* and *shaykhs* is central to the Yazidi community. The *pirs* and *shaykhs* receive alms for the services that they provide for their followers in this world and in the next. Strict endogamy prohibits not only conversion and marriage to non-Yazidi, but also marriages between members of different castes.⁶

In the Yazidi faith individual prayers are not essential, nor are there places that correspond to churches or mosques. The communal religious life is generally limited to religious holidays and the significant life stages of birth, marriage and death. Nevertheless, the Yazidi have an important center in the Lalish Valley situated in the Iraqi-Kurdish Shaykhan, where the shrine of Shaykh ‘Adi ibn Musafir is located. Each year central Yazidi festivals and ceremonies are celebrated there. Additionally, a significant part of religious daily life in both Iraq and Syria is focused on local shrines

⁴ Kreyenbroek 1995: 97.

⁵ Kreyenbroek 1995: 97–98. Some Yazidi are of the opposite opinion that Shaykh ‘Adi began to integrate Islamic elements into the »pure« Yazidi faith; see Spät 2005: 39–40.

⁶ Yalkut-Breddermann 1991: 2.2.9.; Guest 1987: 36.

dedicated to religious figures such as the seven angels, as well as local Yazidi figures. These shrines function primarily as »places of succor« to which the faithful make pilgrimages in order to find comfort for physical, psychological or spiritual problems.⁷

Statistical information on the Yazidi settlement areas

The majority of Syria's Yazidi live in two geographically distinct areas: The first is known as 'Afrin or Jabal al-Akrad and is located (north-)west of the city of Aleppo. It is situated in Aleppo province and includes the districts of 'Afrin and 'Azaz. The second main Yazidi settlement area, the so-called Jazirah, is located in Northeastern Syria, in al-Hasakah province. The majority of the Yazidi in both regions live in rural areas.

There are no precise data on the number of Yazidi living in Syria; no information could be extracted from official statistics in this regard. A current Syrian study estimates that there are between 45,000 and 50,000 Yazidi—20,000 to 25,000 in al-Hasakah province and 25,000 in 'Afrin und 'Azaz.⁸ Drawing on various sources, the author of the study presents a detailed overview of how many families live in which towns in al-Hasakah province and the district of 'Afrin.⁹ A second study estimates that there are around 10,000 Yazidi in the districts of 'Afrin und 'Azaz.¹⁰

The figures of the Yazidi Forum in Oldenburg, a Yazidi exile organization in Germany, are significantly lower. The forum mentions a surprisingly concrete total of 3,357 Yazidi in all of Syria at the end of 2008/beginning of 2009.¹¹ These numbers, however, should be considered with caution. For one thing, those questioned were primarily asylum seekers living in Germany; in other words, no one (still) living in the region was interviewed. Moreover, one might expect that with such a concrete total, it would be evident which cities and towns these people come from. Yet this is not the case.

In evaluating the various numbers one must take into account that both the people interviewed and the authors of the various studies may have had opposing interests. The Yazidi Forum in Oldenburg, a lobbying orga-

7 Spät 2005: 34.

8 See Konê Reş, »Êzîdiyên li Çiyayê Kurmênc (Efrînê)«, December 13, 2010, accessed at <http://www.kurdishinstitute.be/kurdi/minor_ku/788.html> as well as Konê Reş, »Êzîdiyên Cizîrê; Tirbespiyê, Amûdê, Serê Kaniyê û Heseke—2«, July 12, 2010, accessed at <<http://www.dergush.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2094>>. The number 50,000 corresponds to information from Shaykh Husayn Birimo from the town of Khaznawiya ('Afrin), who is considered one of the Yazidi leaders in Syria. The number 45,000 comes from an interview with Shaykh Sa'id, son of Shaykh Hitoye Shaykh Jindo from Sharqiye.

9 See articles mentioned in footnote 8, as well as (by the same author) »Êzîdiyên Cizîrê; Tirbespiyê, Amûdê, Serê Kaniyê û Heseke—1«, December 13, 2010, accessed at <http://www.kurdishinstitute.be/kurdi/minor_ku/1019.html> and »Êzîdiyên Cizîrê; Tirbespiyê, Amûdê, Serê Kaniyê û Heseke—3«, December 13, 2010, accessed at <http://www.kurdishinstitute.be/kurdi/minor_ku/1040.html>.

10 Elî 2008: 122f.

11 Yezidisches Forum 2009: 2.

nization, compiled their study primarily for the German courts in order to support Yazidi asylum seekers living in Germany. The lower the number of Yazidi in Syria, the greater the likelihood of persecution and the higher the percentage of the population affected by abuse, thus the better the chance for recognition as politically persecuted. In contrast, Yazidi dignitaries in Syria, who were among those who formed the basis of the local studies, may have been interested in being the religious leaders of as large a number of followers as possible. Thus they may have provided numbers in accordance with this in their interviews in order to emphasize their own importance. If one presumes that the (non-Yazidi) authors of the studies conducted in Syria may want to prove that the situation of the Yazidi is not dramatic, then this interest corresponds to their Yazidi interview partner's desire for a Yazidi population in Syria that is as large as possible and thus not decimated by flight. Whether such a presumption is plausible remains open to question. At least, the author Konê Reş points to the fact that numerous Yazidi villages are deserted, as the population now lives in Germany.¹² Ultimately we consider the figures from Syria more reliable—they less obviously serve a specific purpose and the overall picture they provide is more plausible than the data from exile.

Government persecution of Yazidi Kurds in Syria

In contrast to Turkey and Iraq, Syria does not have a history of persecution against the Yazidi. Rather, Northeastern Syria became a place of refuge for countless Yazidi from Turkey and Iraq during the time of the French mandate (1920–1946). Yazidi dignitaries were among the signatories of various petitions directed at the French mandate power and the League of Nations between 1932 and 1939 in order to achieve autonomous status for the Jazirah. Even after Syria was granted independence in 1946, the Yazidi did not become a target of the various short-lived governments or, beginning in the 1960s, the Ba'th party. To the present day, there have been no known government-organized pogroms against the Yazidi.

There have also been few reports of religiously motivated attacks against the Yazidi by Muslim Kurds or

12 See Konê Reş, »Êzîdiyên Cizîrê; Tirbespiyê, Amûdê, Serê Kaniyê û Heseke—3«, December 13, 2010, accessed at <http://www.kurdishinstitute.be/kurdi/minor_ku/1040.html>.

by Arabs. The only source that presumes a multitude of such cases is the Yazidi Forum in Oldenburg. For the period from 2000 to 2009, the organization compiled a list of robberies and dispossession (31 cases), assaults (31 cases), and murders (13). Some attacks are attributed to government institutions. Almost all cases occurred in al-Hasakah province, with only two attacks reported from Damascus.¹³ However, in only a few cases on the list do the author's reasons for assuming that the victims were attacked on the basis of their Yazidi faith become even remotely clear.

In contrast, the list that KurdWatch compiled of arrests and convictions of Syrian Kurds in the years 2009 and 2010 includes no cases in which a person's Yazidi faith has played a role in his or her arrest.¹⁴ The various Syrian-Kurdish human-rights organizations also have not reported on attacks to that effect in recent years.¹⁵ The European Center for Kurdish Studies (EZKS), which has provided expert opinions on the situation in Syria since 2002, is also unaware of any cases in which Yazidi in Syria have been attacked, robbed, or killed by Muslims for religious reasons. In March 2007 and July 2009, EZKS employees conducted interviews about the situation of the Yazidi in 'Afrin.¹⁶ There were no references in any of the interviews to specific discrimination against this population group. The only exception was an allegation by one interviewee that there were Mullahs in 'Afrin who described the Yazidi as »unclean« during Friday prayers and prompted Muslims to avoid contact with them. According to his statements, however the discrimination did not go beyond this, and there were certainly no death threats as in Iraq. An interview with a Yazidi attorney from al-Hasakah in May 2010 reached the same conclusion for that province.¹⁷ Finally, there is also no evidence to suggest that criminal acts against Yazidi have been handled any differently by the police or the judiciary than acts against Muslim Kurds or Arabs.¹⁸

All this does not mean that there are no religiously motivated attacks against Yazidi in Syria. However, these cases appear to be isolated, not systematic persecution. Beyond this, the Yazidi in Syria suffer from the same repression as Muslim Kurds—insofar as they

13 Yezidisches Forum 2009: 29–42.

14 See <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?cid=178>> as well as <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?cid=206>>.

15 Interview with a member of the Kurdish Organization for the Defense of Human Rights and General Freedoms (DAD) and the Kurdish Committee for Human Rights (ar-Rasid), November 24, 2010. This assessment was confirmed to us by a leading Yazidi member of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekîti); Interview, November 24, 2010.

16 Interview with two students from 'Afrin, March 7, 2007; Interview with Muhammad A. 'Ali, 'Afrin, Yazidi expert, July 18, 2009.

17 Interview with a Yazidi attorney from al-Hasakah, May 17, 2010.

18 Interview with a Yazidi attorney from al-Hasakah, May 17, 2010.

are politically or culturally active in Kurdish contexts or insofar as they are affected by certain anti-Kurdish decrees. The problem of statelessness existing since 1962 is especially worth noting here.

Ultimately there are certainly religious prejudices against the Yazidi among both Kurdish and Arab Muslims, and these prejudices may be expressed in specific forms of daily discrimination. For example, some Muslims will not buy from Yazidi at the marketplace, because they consider the Yazidi and their wares »unclean«. These reservations may be somewhat greater in al-Hasakah province than in the 'Afrin region. Traditionally the relationship between Yazidi and Muslim Kurds has been closer in 'Afrin than in al-Hasakah. This may be connected to the fact that some of the Yazidi in al-Hasakah or rather their ancestors only immigrated from Turkey from the 1920s onward. In contrast, the Yazidi of 'Afrin have lived there for several centuries.

Yazidi religion versus Islam and Christianity

Given the lack of systematic, religiously motivated persecution described above, one cannot assume that the various religions in Syria are handled equally. For example, Syrian schools have no Yazidi religious instruction, only Islamic and Christian, which are both organized by the Ministry of Education. Yazidi are required to take part in the Muslim instruction and the grades received there are relevant to promotion. There is no generally valid answer to the question of whether Yazidi are forced to learn and recite Qur'an verses in this context, thus violating the religious commandments of Yazidism (for example by mentioning the term »devil«). This likely varies from school to school and from teacher to teacher, but one cannot assume that their religion is generally taken into consideration. However this type of discrimination also cannot be described as systematic and supported by the state. Though, the mere fact that there is no Yazidi religious instruction and that Yazidi are forced to take part in Islamic instruction does represent discrimination. At the same time, this reflects the (state) assessment that Yazidism is fundamentally not an independent religion.

This assessment also becomes clear in connection with marriages: Getting married before a shariah court is a requirement for registering a marriage with the civil register office—not only for Muslims, but also for Yazidi. In contrast, church institutions are responsible for religious marriages between Christians. Additionally, according to a Yazidi informant from ‘Afrin, the civil register office there does not register marriages if the parties in question insist that their religious affiliation be entered as »Yazidi«. ¹⁹ In contrast, according to another Yazidi informant, it is typical in al-Hasakah province that, at least in marriages between Yazidi before the shariah court, the Yazidi religious affiliation is entered on the marriage certificate. ²⁰ We have no information regarding possible difficulties in registering marriages with the civil register office in al-Hasakah province.

In the civil register, religious affiliation may be entered as Yazidi, as well as Muslim or Christian. In contrast, a person’s religion is generally not noted on identification cards. ²¹ According to a Yazidi informant from ‘Afrin, now living in Germany, this used to be different—on his own identification card he was still listed as a »Muslim Arab«. ²²

There are no laws or decrees that limit the celebration of Yazidi festivals in Syria. As the Yazidi in Syria are exclusively Kurds, however, there is a danger that the state could interpret such celebrations as an expression of Kurdish identity, thus resulting in persecution.

Public celebration has a long tradition in ‘Afrin. The previously cited study by Mihemed E. Elî reads:

»On the day of Red Wednesday [Yazidi New Year’s festival on the first Wednesday in April] the Yazidi visit their shaykhs, go out into nature, and celebrate their festival. Until twenty years ago, there were classical celebrations in the month of April. One visited the sanctuaries, food was distributed, and one danced to Daf and Zurna [frame drums and oboe]. Today there are large celebrations in front of the sanctuaries Shaykh Barket, Parsa Khatune and Chelkhane.« ²³

According to a Yazidi informant from ‘Afrin, in past years the Yazidi were allowed to celebrate their religious holidays publicly and could visit their sanctuar-

19 Interview with a Yazidi from ‘Afrin (I), Berlin, May 17, 2010.

20 Information from a Yazidi attorney from al-Hasakah, May 17, 2010.

21 Interview with an attorney from al-Qamishli, November 26, 2010; inspection of various identification cards and extracts from the civil register.

22 Interview with a Yazidi from ‘Afrin (I), Berlin, May 17, 2010.

23 Elî 2008: 46f.

ies in ‘Afrin.²⁴ According to another informant from ‘Afrin, »Red Wednesday« has been celebrated publicly in the town of Qastal Jindo for approximately eight or nine years. A stage is built for this occasion, various shaykhs come and recite religious texts, and there is music and dancing.²⁵ In the year 2009, »Red Wednesday« was also celebrated in the town of ‘Ayn Darab. Roughly one thousand people are said to have taken part in the celebrations, whereupon members of the Security Services allegedly asked the celebrants to celebrate in their towns the following year rather than in a central location.²⁶ It is unclear whether this request is connected with the Yazidi or the Kurdish character of this festival, or perhaps with the fact that one of the illegal Kurdish parties was involved in the organization of the festival. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), with its close ties to the PKK, occasionally seems to support the organization of Yazidi festivals in ‘Afrin. A 2008 PYD declaration on »Red Wednesday« in Qastal Jindo provides evidence of this.²⁷

Moreover in 2009, security forces are said to have blocked Yazidi access to the sanctuary Shaykh Barket.²⁸

The various Yazidi festivals are also celebrated publicly in different localities in al-Hasakah province. The celebrations there, which also include music and dancing, are similar to public Newroz festivities. Only conservative Yazidi explicitly reject public celebration and prefer to remain at home on holidays.²⁹ A video on YouTube shows Yazidi festivities in the town of Otilja in al-Hasakah to mark »Red Wednesday« in 2008.³⁰ In the video, one can see and hear the Kurdish national anthem being played and a children’s group reciting Yazidi qawl (religious hymns). A picture of Hafiz al-Assad and a Syrian flag hang on a post in the background. This illustrates that it is possible to make »compromises« with the Syrian government. Symbols of Kurdish national identity—such as the Kurdish national anthem—are tolerated in certain circumstances as long as symbols of Syrian identity—the flag and the picture of the president—are displayed at the same time.

In summary, it should be emphasized that in Syria Yazidism is not on equal footing with Islam and Christianity. Various forms of institutional discrimination arise

24 Interview with a Yazidi from ‘Afrin (I), Berlin, May 17, 2010.

25 Videos of the 2009 celebration in Qastal Jindo can be seen on YouTube: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjSMHHGVNBA>>; <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XnGNY3MSwQ>> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_chy8knNas>.

26 Interview with a Yazidi from ‘Afrin (II), Berlin, May 17, 2010.

27 See the corresponding declaration by the PYD: »Komeleya Êzdiyên Sûriyê hat damezrandin«, April 17, 2008, accessed at <<http://dergush.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1141>>.

28 Interview with a Yazidi from ‘Afrin (II), Berlin, May 17, 2010. This information corresponds to evidence that staff members of the EZKS received in a July 2009 interview on the situation of the Yazidi in ‘Afrin; Interview with a political activist from ‘Afrin, July 16, 2009.

29 Interview with a Yazidi attorney from al-Hasakah, May 17, 2010.

30 See <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81Bwfx6aJjc>>; <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyLWHHVcWu4>>; and <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVVnT4YnFew>>.

from this (marriage, religious instruction). Nevertheless, public celebrations of Yazidi festivals are generally possible; Yazidi identity is not suppressed per se. Therefore, one must not presume that there is targeted state persecution of Yazidi Kurds on the basis of their religion.

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