Between Rights, Political Participation and Opposition: the Case of Yezidis in Syrian Kurdistan (Rojāvā)

By Majid Hassan Ali and Seyedeh Behnaz Hosseini

Abstract

After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the Kurdish Protection Units, Yakīnayyin Pārāstnā Gal (YPG) and Yakīnayyin Pārāstnā Jin (YPJ), took control of northeastern Syria where they formed the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) in the three districts of al-Jazīra, Kūbāni, and ʿAfrīn. The DFNS was established as a self-governing project with a special political and administrative system that emphasizes the rights and political participation of all ethnic groups and religious minorities in those provinces.

The Yezidi, as a religious minority, are scattered throughout these provinces and are engaged in some local administrative institutions on a certain scale. They also form their own civil society institutions. Concurrently, there is a Yezidi political organization that is opposed to the policies of self-government and that accuses Rojāvā's Kurdish authorities of marginalizing the political participation of the Yezidi and other religious minorities. In this paper, we will discuss the Yezidis' political participation and representation within these areas, their autonomous institutions, and their political opposition.

Keywords: Yezidi, political identity, Kurds, Syria, political participation.

Introduction

Yezidis are dispersed throughout Syria. Their places of residence are mainly concentrated in the governorates of Aleppo and Ḥasakah in northern Syria. In Aleppo, they are mainly reside in the city of ʿAfrīn and some its outlying villages such as Qībārī, Qasṭal-Jandū, Faqīra and Jandīrīs. Also in some other towns such as Shaykh-Maqṣūd, Bīstān-Pāshā, Sryān-Qadīm, Sryān Jadīd and Saīf al-Dawla. In the province of Ḥasakah, the Yezidi lived among the Arab and Kurdish tribes, in towns such as al-Jārrāḥ, located in east of Qāmishlū city, Darbāsīyya, ʿAmūda, Tirba-Spīyya (al-Qaḥṭāniyya), and Sari-Kānyyi (Rās al-ʿAīn) and other villages and towns with Yezidis residents.

The Syrian Yezidi population is not known, as they do not appear in the official statistics. Some estimate their number at between 30,000 and 67,000 (Khūrī 2006). Yezidi political groups estimate that their number exceeds 150,000 (SYC 2012). Both estimates date back to before the civil war, and the increasing migration due to political developments has led to a significant decrease in the number of Yezidis living in Syria.

The Yezidi community in Syria was a predominantly peasant society with a high rate of illiteracy until the 1970s. As an unrecognized religion in the midst of Muslim communities, they feared to go to schools in areas far from their villages. According to one Yezidi:

> It is very difficult for a Yezidi student to live in a city of non-Yezidis, especially if anyone knows that this student is Yezidi. That student will not be left in peace. The student will have to leave his studies. This happened to me when I was in high school and I was taking exams in Qāmishlū with Kurdish Muslim students. They attacked my religion all the time and said that I was a kāfir and that I must become Muslim. I had to leave the dormitory of the High School in Qāmishlū and stay

kurdishonline

> in a hotel so that no one would know me, and yet they did not leave me alone until one of them beat me severely. Even when I studied in Damascus and Aleppo, I could not be able to show my religion and hide fear of them. (Gharībū 2013).

Mot every Yezidi is beaten up, of course. Nevertheless, such cases of social discrimination exist. In order to address this problem, Yezidis created semi-stable social relations between themselves and their Arab, Kurdish or other ethnic/religious neighbors via the custom of the association of a brethren relationship, also known as Krīv or Krīvātī (which means brethren).[1] This custom serves to forge a link between the weaker minority to the stronger majority.[2]

The lack of systematic social discrimination is mainly due to the semi-secular nature of Syrian society, the influence of left-wing currents, and even the Ba'ath Party, which tried to create a liberal secular society. However, there was some discrimination at the official level. For example, Yezidis were not allowed to hold important positions in the military, the judicial system.[3]

This paper draws on news articles, online analysis of political data, and personal interviews with individuals concerned about the political participation of Yezidis in Syrian Kurdistan, or Rojāvā. The interviews show the reasoning behind the Yezidis' political positions.

The Syrian Civil War and Kurdish Self-Governance in Northern Syria (Rojāvā)

When the Syrian conflict shifted from protests to a civil war, the Syrian opposition forces split into several political and military currents, including domestic and foreign Islamic groups. Some took control of wide geographic areas such as al-Nuṣra Front (now: Hayʾat Taḥrīr al-Shām), the Islamic State (ISIS), ʿAḥrār al-Shām, and some others that are active under the name of National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF). The Democratic Union Party (Partīyyā Yakitīyyā Damokrātīk or PYD) and other Kurdish and ethnic political groups formed a bloc called the Movement for a Democratic Society (Tavgarā Civākā Damokrātīk, TEV-DEM), (cf: Ekurd Daily 2015). In the areas that have come under their control, military units were formed called the People's Protection Units (Yakīnayyin Pārāstnā Gal or YPG). These have taken control of northeastern Syria and aimed at self-governing under the name of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) in three districts: al-Jazīra, Kūbani, and ʿAfrīn. They established a political and administrative system that intends to incorporate rights and political participation of all ethnic groups and religious minorities in those provinces.

Some of the other Kurdish political parties and groups formed a political block opposed to TEV-DEM. This opposition operates under the name of the Kurdish National Council (Enjūmanā Nishtīmānī yā Kurdī li Sūrīyyā or ENKS), (see: Carnegie Middle East Center 2012) and it joined other Syrian opposition factions and officially opposes those in power in Rojāvā.

There is little information about the Yezidis' participation in the revolution in Syria after 2011. It seems that they initially did not support the rebels mainly because they are a small minority religious group and later, they did not want to side with the armed groups and later with the Islamic opposition. Regardless, many of their villages were attacked during the fighting. For example, they were attacked by al-Nuṣra Front and ISIS, who described the Yezidis as infidels. These groups attacked Yezidi villages, such as Qasṭal-Jandū in ʿAfrīn province. Al-Nuṣra Front attacked villages in Sari-Kānyyi on 17 April 2014, which resulted in several dead and wounded.[4] These attacks led to the displacement and migration of Yezidis.

kurdlib.online

The Legal, Constitutional, and Political Rights of Yezidis in Syria

Yezidis lacked legal, constitutional or political rights in Syria before 2011. From a religious point of view, the Yezidi religion was unrecognized. One of the reasons for this could be their small numbers and the fact that they are scattered throughout Syria. Notably, the Syrian central government treated Yezidis as generic Muslims (as were other minorities, such as the ʻAlawis, the Isma'ilis/Nusayris, and the Druze). Yezidi children had to take Islamic studies classes and in Syrian courts, they had to swear upon the Qur'an, which they do not believe in (Khūrī 2006). Yezidis were also subject to Islamic Shariʿa courts in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance, although the Syrian Constitutional Law of 1973 and its amendments, article no. 35 states (Constitution of the Syrian Republic and its amendments 2007):
1. Freedom of belief is safeguarded and the State respects all religions.
2. The State shall guarantee the freedom to perform all religious rites on condition without prejudice to public order.

In the era of President Bashar al-Assad, a modified constitution was prepared for 2012. Article 3 states (jadaliyya.com 2012):
1. The State shall respect all religions and shall ensure the free exercise of all their rites, on the condition that they do not contradict public order.
2. The personal status of religious communities is safeguarded and cared for.

The government did not recognize Yezidis as a separate entity or offer them a cultural and political role in Syria until the outbreak of civil war in 2011. In this context, Yezidis emigrated and fled not only because of the war.

As for their political rights, many were denied Syrian citizenship, because the government considered them immigrants or foreigners. In this, their treatment was similar to that of the stateless Muslim Kurds living. The Syrian government deprived Kurds and Yezidis of Syrian nationality because they had come to Syria from Turkey in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s (Human Rights Watch 1996). Stateless Yezidis were deprived of many opportunities such as the holding of any official jobs and other activities in the state.[5]

In the past, Yezidis had no political organization within the official Syrian state, despite their participating in the growing communist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which supported minorities as equal citizens in the Syrian state on principle. Marxist ideology was popular in all the secret Kurdish parties in Syria, yet Yezidis did not reach any leadership positions in these leftist parties with only a few exceptions. There were a couple of Yezidis involved with the PKK after the 1980s. The fact that the Syrian Yezidi community was a non-political society at that time, helps explain the lack of established Yezidi political organizations until recently.[6]

When the TEV-DEM established the three provinces under a system of joint leadership and self-government that aimed to represent the region's ethnic diversity, many Yezidis joined them and became members of the YPG and YPJ. Rojāvā has further allowed ethnic and religious minorities to establish their own cultural and social associations in all three provinces.

Since 2011, Yezidis have formed civil society associations and organizations within Rojāvā, especially in Ḥasakah and ʿAfrīn. On 18 December 2014, the Education Authority of ʿAfrīn Province announced that in coordination with a Yezidi association, the Yezidi religion would officially be included in the curriculum at schools in the province. Indeed, a group of young Yezidi men and women have been trained to teach Yezidism in some of the schools in Yezidi villages (Zamanalwsl.net 2014).

kurdlib.online

In Germany, the Yezidi diaspora established a political organization on March 10, 2012, in the city of Bielefeld, called the Syrian Yezidi Council (SYC). This is the first political organization that has declared itself to be the political representative of Syrian Yezidis.[7] Mizgīn Yūsif was chosen to head the party, and she is the first Yezidi woman to become head of a political party in Syria. The SYC has stressed in its political program that it seeks to defend the cultural, social, and political rights of Syrian Yezidis within the framework of the Syrian state. The SYC demands the official recognition of Yezidism as a religion in Syria and the recognition of all their religious festivals and rituals. It also demands the allocation of quota seats and official representation in all state institutions along the lines of the quota system for minorities in Iraq. It also wishes that Yezidism be considered a state religion.

It should be noted that in the second article of its rules of procedure, the SYC has declared the Yezidis to be Kurds (SYC, 2012). Moreover, it considers Yezidis in Syria as part of Kurdish movement. However, given the political loyalties of the large Kurdish parties in Rojāvā, the SYC subsequently split into two separate groups. One is called the Syrian Yezidi Rally (SYR) and it has announced its support of self-government in Rojāvā. The SYR has become part of the TEV-DEM. The other faction kept the original name of SYC and joined the ENKS.

The conflict in Syria placed two options before the SYC. They could either side with the central government or with the opposition. They decided to stand with the opposition and have begun to hold meetings with various political groups and have made proposals on Yezidi demands. As a result, the SYC became a member of ENKS and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces NCSROF.[8] Although the SYC joined ENKS in 2014, they withdrew from it in 2016 and accused it of marginalizing Yezidis as a political partner in the ENKS' political decisions.[9] However, they are still in contact.

There are several reasons why the SYC party is opposed to self-governance, including the accusation of Rojāvā's deliberate marginalization of Yezidi political participation there, as well as an objection to PYD ideology's attempt to impose a theory and a special philosophy to their interpretation of the Yezidi religion. (The PYD considers them as an extension of the Zoroastrian religion and erected a statue of Zoroaster in the headquarters of one of the Yezidi associations in ʿAfrīn, which led to much resentment from the SYC that wishes Yezidis be seen as an independent religion).[10] This is a controversial difference between the SYC and the PYD.

Conclusion

The Kurdish political parties regard the Yezidis as part of them. This, however, has deprived Yezidis of many political rights. Despite the establishment of an effective administrative entity in large areas of northern Syria, the Yezidis remain marginalized because they are simply considered a subset of the Kurdish community, rather than a separate community with special needs.

After numerous interviews with Syrian Yezidi elites, it became clear to the authors that pre-2011, Yezidis were little exposed to significant social discrimination from surrounding Muslim communities. Rather, they faced problems and difficulties on an official level related to, for example, the study of the Islamic religion, and the absence of specific personal status laws pertaining to Yezidis.

One of the most important conclusions is that there has been no political Syrian Yezidi identity crisis. Unlike in neighboring countries, Yezidi political organizations have clearly said that they consider themselves to be Kurds. Yet, political differences continue to exist between the Kurdish parties and Yezidi organizations because of their marginalization and lack of involvement in political decisions.

kurdlib.online

Majid Hassan Ali is a doctoral student at University of Bamberg, Bamberg Graduate School of Near and Middle Eastern Studies (BaGOS), Institute of Oriental Studies, Bamberg, Germany. He is also a lecturer at Duhok University in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. His doctoral research focuses on religious minorities in Iraq. Email: majidhassan.ali@gmail.com

Seyedeh Behnaz Hosseini completed her doctoral research with a focus on the Yāresān, a religious minority in Iran, and to a lesser extent in northeastern Iraq, and forced migration in the Department of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Vienna. Currently, she is a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta, where she is working on a research project on Iranian religious minorities. Email: seyedehbehnazhosseini@gmail.com

Endnotes

[1] When a Muslim is invited to a circumcision party, it establishes social ties between Yezidis and Muslims. It makes them into blood-brothers. A blood-brotherhood is defined as the relationship when two men pledge mutual loyalty through the ceremonial use of each other's blood. This obliges the person who became a Krīv for Yezidi to defend him.
[2] Dilgash ʿĪssā, interview by Majid H. Ali, 24 Oct. 2017, Göttingen, Germany.
[3] Ibrāhīm Khidhr Smū, interview by Majid H. Ali, 9 Nov. 2017, Bielefeld, Germany.
[4] Nūrī Ramū, interview by Majid H. Ali, 9 Nov. 2017, Bielefeld, Germany; Sarhān ʿĪssā, interview by Majid H. Ali, November 8, 2017, Bielefeld, Germany.
[5] Nūrī Ramū, interview by Majid H. Ali, 9 Nov. 2017, Bielefeld, Germany.
[6] Ibrāhīm Khidhr Smū, interview by Majid H. Ali, 9 Nov. 2017, Bielefeld, Germany.
[7] Sarhān ʿĪssā, interview by Majid H. Ali, 8 Nov. 2017, Bielefeld, Germany.
[8] Sarhān ʿĪssā, the official spokesman of the Yezidi Council of Syria, interview by Maksîm ʻĪssā, *Orient Onair*, 28 May 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FACxXKTB1E>.
[9] Sarhān ʿĪssā, "ENKS, the reasons for the withdrawal of the SYC from NCSROF and the", interview by Ali Isso, *Orient News*, 16 Sept. 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iu5iI5q_05U&app=desktop>.
[10] Sarhān ʿĪssā, interview by Majid H. Ali, 8 Nov. 2017, Bielefeld, Germany.

References

"Al-Barnamaj (The Program)." *Rat der Syrischen Eziden* (*The Syrian Yezidi Council)*, 10 March 2012. <http://ezidenrat.de/?page_id=196>.

"Constitution of the Syrian Republic and its Amendments." *Human Rights Public Library*, 2007. <https://old.qadaya.net/node/135>.

Gharībū, Firmaz. "Al-Yazīdīyyūn fī Sūrīyā (the Yezidis in Syria)." *Dimoqrati*, 2013. <http://www.dimoqrati.info/?p=7938>.

Khūrī, ʿIsām. "Taqrīr ʿan Dīn allāh al-mughīb fī Sūrīyya (Report of the Yezidis – the God religion is absent in Syria)." *Al-Hīwār al-Mutamadin*, 23 April 2006. <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=62940>.

kurdlib.online

"People's Defense Units (YPG)." *YPG Rojava*, no date. < https://www.ypgrojava.org/english>.

Samman, M. L. *La population de la Syrie: étude géo-démographique.* Paris: O.R.S.T.O.M., 1978.

"Syria: The Silenced Kurds." *Human Rights Watch*, 1996. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm>.

"The Kurdish National Council in Syria." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 15 Feb. 2012. <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48502>.

"The Project of a Democratic Syria: Movement for a Democratic Society, Rojava." *Ekurd Daily*, 17 Feb, 2015. <http://ekurd.net/the-project-of-a-democratic-syria-movement-for-a-democratic-society-rojava-2015-02-17>.

"كامل نص الدستور السوري الجديد الذي تسلمه بشار الأسد (The Syrian Constitution)." *Jadaliyya*, 16 Feb. 2016. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4410/%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D9%86%D8%B5-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3>.

"اعتماد تدريس الديانة "الإيزيدية" في عفرين (The Teaching of the Yezidi Religion in Afrîn)." *Zaman al-Wasl*, 19 Dec. 2014. <www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/56359>.

kurdlib.online