

Syria's Yezidis in the Kūrd Dāgh and the Jazīra: Building Identities in a Heterodox Community

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Analyzing the historical situation, social status and identity of Yezidis in Syria means to highlight the territorial differences between the two major groups. The position of the Yezidis in the Syrian Jazīra is, indeed, significantly different from the Yezidis in the Kūrd Dāgh region of Western Syria. I will argue that the latter suffer discrimination due to their religious origin and thus primarily define their identity along those lines. Yezidis in the Jazīra however consider both religion and ethnicity the base of their identity because they are persecuted for both reasons. Through an analysis of the history and a comparison of the doctrines I aim to show how the two groups evolved, developed and found their current space within the Syrian context of minorities.

Yezidis in the Kūrd Dāgh lived in the area for several centuries and thus are better integrated into the society at large. The distance to the religious centers in Northern Iraq has always been far, which led to the development of unique customs and traditions. However, as for the Yezidis in the Jazīra, this is not the case. Although they settled in the villages about a century ago, they were constantly confronted with new political borders and population exchanges with the local communities, which overall contributed to the weakening of their position in the social context of the region. On one hand they were cut off from other Yezidi areas in Sinjar, Iraq and Tur Abdin, Turkey due to the arbitrary drawing of political borders after World War One. On the other hand their area was systematically Arabized and Islamized through the displacement of Kurdish families and the resettlement of Arab-Muslim peasants in the so-called Arab Belt in the Jazīra. In addition, this region has been the destination of various waves of refugees from Turkey and Iraq.

The Yezidi Community

Yezidis are a Kurdish speaking religious community, who mainly lives in Northern Iraq. Smaller groups are living in Armenia, Germany, Syria and Georgia¹. It seems

¹ While northern Iraq and Syria are part of the original and indigenous Yezidi homeland, countries like Armenia, Georgia and recently Germany became centers of emigration for Yezidi communities.

appropriate to estimate the average number of the Yezidis at ca. 450,000 based on Yezidi data (ca. 800,000) and non-Yezidi information, in this case Arab-Muslim sources, which speak of ca. 150,000. The religious center of the community is Lālīsh in the Sheikhan District west of Mosul in Iraq. Ba'adhra, a small town in the vicinity of Lālīsh is the residence of the leaders of the Yezidis: supreme leader Mīr Taḥsīn Bek and the religious head of the Baba Sheikh. Over the last centuries, the Yezidis living in their areas of origin experienced political, cultural and social upheavals based on different forms of interaction with non-Yezidi communities. Most of these encounters were discriminative experiences which contributed to the formation of a distinct Yezidi identity both at home and in exile.

Most Yezidis consider themselves ethnic Kurds². The Yezidis of Syria are one of the smallest groups within the Syrian context of religious and ethnic minorities. Exact population data are unavailable, but it is estimated that the number of Yezidis living in Syria is not exceeding 10,000. State and society recognize the Yezidis as Kurds of a different religious belief. Most Kurds of Syria are Sunni Muslims. The small number of Yezidis and subsequently the small size of their community had a negative effect on their position in the Syrian minority context. Similarly detrimental was the split up and division of their traditional settlement areas. Following the arbitrary drawing of political borders after World War I through the administration of the French mandate and territorial swaps between Syria and Turkey, the Yezidis in Syria ended up living in two isolated areas, which furthermore were cut off from the religious centers of the community and from the main settlements in Northern Iraq.

The Syrian Yezidi Community

One of the two main Yezidi settlements is located west and northwest of Aleppo and is called Jabal al-Akrād, Kūrd Dāgh, Jabal Sim'ān, al-Gūma³ or Jabal al-'Urūba. Today this area is commonly called 'Afrīn Area after the largest city and administrative district. The Yezidis in the Kūrd Dāgh live in a predominantly Muslim environment. Along with some Druzes, they are the only religious minority in the area. Since the majority of the population in the Kūrd Dāgh is Kurdish they are not an ethnic minority there. The Yezidi villages are spread over the entire region, but are concentrated within three enclaves:⁴

² Small, but notable exemptions of this notion are communities in Armenia, who are considered to be ethnic Yezidis (!), and in some areas in Iraq (Bashīqa, Baḥzanī and Sinjar), where Yezidis think of themselves as Arabs and speak Arabic as their native tongue.

³ If possible, Kurdish names of places and people have been transliterated according to their Arabic spelling. However, a standardized transliteration that takes both Kurdish and Arabic into account is still needed.

⁴ Fieldwork undertaken by the author (1995–2006), Khadīda Sheikh Khalaf, "Ziyāra 'inda l-Yazīdiyya fī Sūriā", *Nūr Lālīsh* 11 (2004), 19–20.; and Zerdeshṭ Deshtī, "Ezdīyen Kurdax", *PIRS* 6/2 (1995), 28–30. Roger Lescot, *Enquête sur les Yezidis de Syrie et du Djebel Sindjar* (Beyrouth: Librairie du Liban, 1938),

The Shikāk region includes the following Yezidi villages: Qastal Jindo, Baflūn, Qatma and Sīnka. The Gūma region with the villages of Faqīra, Ghazawīya, 'Arsh Qībar, Turunda, Shāder, Ceqelī Gūma, Īska, 'Ayndāra, 'Ashq Sharqī and Kafr Zēt. In the Sherew region Yezidis live in the villages of Bāsufan, Kimar and Gunde Mezin (Sūq al-Kabīr). In addition, Yezidi families were located in the following towns and cities: Burj Abdalū, Baīya, 'Alī Iqīn, Quqamān, 'Afrīn, 'Azāz, and Aleppo. Only Bāsufan, Faqīra, and Baflūn are entirely Yezidi.

There are around 700 Yezidi families living in the area. With a Yezidi (and Kurdish) family usually consisting of seven to ten members, a total number of approximately 5,000 Yezidis in northwestern Syria can be assumed. Yezidi families are organized along tribal lines and often reside together with their extended families and lineages. Among the important Yezidi tribes are the Dinādi, Reshkān, Dawudīya, Sheriqān, Khāliti and Qopanī⁵; however, it should be mentioned that the notion of tribe and tribal cohesion among Yezidis in the Kūrd Dāgh area is less distinct than among the Yezidis of the Jazīra.

The Jazīra is the second main living area of Yezidis in Syria. Around the two administrative centers, al-Ḥasaka and al-Qāmishlī, Yezidi communities are separated in three small enclaves consisting of several villages: first in the Wādī al-Jarrāḥ northwest of al-Qāmishlī around the city of Qaḥtānīya (formerly known as Qubūr Bīd or Tirbe Spī) with the villages of Alarash, Otilja, Tall Hanūn, Mizgeft, Tall Khatunk, and Deryacik; then the area between 'Āmūda and al-Ḥasaka with the villages of Khirba Khidr, Tall Tawīl, Sulaimānī, Tolku, Zēdiye, Berzan, Jidale, Judaida, Tall Tayr, Gumar, Gumar Gharbī, Tall Aswad, Mahmūdīya, 'Antarīya, Mōrik, Nāsirīya, Khirbat Jamāl, Awgira, Hasheri, Mehek, Mozko, Khirbat Dilan, Būr Sa'īd, Khirbat Khaz'al, Khirbat Khwē, Tall Hishk, Kulye, Merkeb, Khirbat Faqīra, Kislacuk, Gondor, Kerengo, Dūgerki and Cetele. Finally, there are several villages near the city of Ras al-'Ayn along the Khabūr River: Asadīya, Tall Sakhar, Tall Bayder, Merekis, Can Temir, Shakarīya, Lizga, Cafa, Derdera, Tall Eliyeh, Abu Jarade, Tall Nāif, Khirbat Batana, and Tall Khanzīr. In addition, some Yezidi families moved to the urban centers of the region. Yezidis in the Jazīra belong to the tribes of Dāsikan, Bahcolān, Kiwakhī, Heverkān, Semōqa, Mihirkān and Efshanī. Many of the Kurdish tribes, such as the Millī or Heverkān, are, however, multi-religious including Christian, Sunni and/or Yezidi tribal groups. The number of Yezidis living in the Jazīra

265–268 mentioned the following villages which are predominantly Yezidi: Qestel, Sinkelle, Bafilun, Qatme, Erse Qibar, Turunde, Jdede, Basuta, Kimar, Burj Abdalo, Kefr Zet, Karabash, Ghezewiye, Sheikh Khidr, Basufan, Kibeshin, Kefr Shin, Iskan, Gunde Mezin, Bashemra, and Burj el-Qas.

⁵ On the tribal affiliation and character of Yezidi society see Mark Sykes, "The Kurdish Tribes of the Ottoman Empire", *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 38 (1908), 451–486.; Lescot, *Enquête* (1938), 251–268; Aḥmad Waṣfī Zakariya, *'Asḥar al-Sham* (Damascus, 2007), 657–674 and Kereme Anqosi, "The Yezidi Kurds' tribes & clans of south Caucasus." *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 19.1–2 (Jan 2005): 88–90.

is estimated around 4,000.⁶ Finally, isolated Yezidi families can be found in the large Syrian cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hamah.

Adding the numbers of the Yezidis in the Kūrd Dāgh and the few people in the urban centers brings the total Yezidi population to roughly 10,000, however with a steady decrease.

The vast majority of Syrian Yezidis still works in the agricultural sector as farmers, pastoralists or day laborers. Only the few families in the larger cities find work in the service sector. Those families however have a different status than the rest of the community because they often lost the bond to their area of origin. In very few cases, they were able to enter public secular institutions such as the military or universities.

Throughout history there were almost no formal contacts between the two Syrian Yezidi communities. Informal and religious relations continued; however, they never reached the level of marital relation. The reason for this is that many conservative and traditional Yezidis of the Jazīra considered their brothers in faith as deviators who no longer adhered to orthodox Yezidi doctrine. They accused them of assimilation into the Muslim environment.

However, this claim can hardly be supported. It is true that Yezidis in 'Afrīn are economically in a better situation, and they did find a place in the social hierarchy of society at large. Due to their concentration in big villages, balanced relations between Yezidi and Muslim Kurds prevailed. Both groups lived together in stable conditions for many centuries, which created a status-quo of mutual tolerance. Usually, they left each other alone and did not worry about the affairs of the others. In some economic and political issues, mostly related to problems with the authorities, they even cooperated on occasions. With regard to their religious observances, however, the community became known for not adhering to the common Yezidi dogma of endogamy of marriage within one caste.⁷ The religious life in 'Afrīn is further affected

⁶ Yezidisches Forum Oldenburg *Stellungnahme zu der Situation der Yeziden in Nordostsyrien auf Anfrage des VG Magdeburg*. Oldenburg, 2006, 2.; according to an official census from 1939 the Jezira had 158,550 inhabitants. Among them were 81,450 Muslim Kurds and 2,150 Yezidis, see Jordie Tejel, "The Terrier Plan and the emergence of a Kurdish policy under the French Mandate in Syria, 1926–1936 (Report)", *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 21/1–2 (2007), 109. Jordie Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: Continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925–1946)* (Bern, Frankfurt, New York: Peter Lang, 2007) gave a detailed list of Yezidi communities for the year 1939: "Selon le recensement effectué par les autorités mandataires en 1939, la communauté Yezidi se répartit comme suit: ville de Damas: 2, Caza du Kurd Dagh: 1,135; Caza d'Azaz: 8; Caza d'Hassetche: 123; Caza de Qamishli: 838." (Source: CADN, Fonds Beyrouth, Cabinet Politique, no. 8. "Inscription des Yezidis à l'état civil syrien", Beyrouth, le 1er Octobre 1940, p. 1).

⁷ Yezidi society is organized in three non-related groups of religious status: primary religious leaders (*sheikh*), secondary religious leaders (*pīr*) and laymen (*murīd*). Marriage is only allowed within the group. Many cases of marriages between laymen and clergy are reported from 'Afrīn.

by the small number of clerics who are able to perform rituals or educate the community.⁸

Early History

A variety of often contradictory opinions regarding the origin of the Yezidi community can in general be found among Yezidi and non-Yezidi scholars. Often, a relation to ancient Mesopotamian cultures and religions is suggested. Others still support the idea of an Islamic fraction. However, the latter argument has finally disappeared in Western publications giving room to a general consensus that views Yezidism as a system of pre-Islamic Kurdish traditions,⁹ which was reformed by the Sufi Sheikh 'Adī bin Musāfir. Under his successor al-Ḥasan bin 'Adī the transformation continued integrating additional pre-Islamic elements and rituals.¹⁰

According to some, Yezidism is also a religion based on sacred books, drawing parallels to the "People of the Book", and their status of protection under Islamic law. One of the two holy scriptures of the Yezidis, the Mashaf Resh, already mentioned a Yezidi community near Aleppo. However, since their publication, the appearance and authenticity of the books are a highly controversial issue. They have to be treated with caution. Also, the main source of religious tradition was the oral transmission of hymns, psalms, and other religious texts.¹¹

The documented history of the Yezidis in Syria began around the year 1070 with the birth of Sheikh 'Adī bin Musāfir in Bayt Fār (Khirbat Qanāfir), a small village in the Beqaa Valley. Today located in Lebanon, it was then part of Greater Syria (Bilād al-Shām). His parents and nephew also came from this region giving the area some religious significance. A shrine in the predominantly Christian village is dedicated to Sheikh 'Adī. However, people in the area do not associate Sheikh 'Adī bin Musāfir with Yezidism, but remember him as a Sufi saint.

In another sacred text it is mentioned that Sheikh 'Adī's family originally came from the Ḥakkārī Mountains and that his grandfather was the first to move to Bayt Fār. Sheikh

⁸ During the French Mandate, a Yezidi school existed in 'Arsh Qībar, which was financed by the local community and which had a Christian and a Yezidi teacher. The religious instruction was in the hand of a sheikh from Sinjar. The school was open for ten years only. See Roger Lescot, *Enquête*, 89–90.

⁹ Philip Kreyenbroek, & Khalil Jindy Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2005), 3.

¹⁰ Irene Dulz, Siamend Hajo and Eva Savelsberg, "Persecuted and Co-opted — The Yezidis in the 'New Iraq'", *The Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 6 (2008), 29.

¹¹ On the Yezidi sacred books see Maximilian Bittner, *Die heiligen Bücher der Jeziden oder Teufelsanbeter* (Vienna: Denkschriften der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1913), Celile Celil, "Mythologie, Kult und zwei heilige Bücher der Yazidi", in *Yazidi: Gottes auserwähltes Volk oder die "Teufelsanbeter" vom Djabal Sinjar (Irak)*, eds. Axel Steinmann and Karin Kren (Wien: 1998) and Kreyenbroek.

‘Adī later moved to Baghdad and then back to the Ḥakkārī Mountains, where he founded the Sufi order of the ‘Adawiya, which merged with local religious traditions of sun-worshipping.¹²

The first written accounts on the Yezidis and their most important historical and religious figure, Sheikh ‘Adī bin Musāfir can be located in sources from the 12th century.¹³ The main reason for dealing with this then relatively small and unimportant group is the accusation of heresy which Islamic orthodoxy brought against them. Therefore, many prominent Islamic historians, jurists, and geographers wrote about the “strange” beliefs of the Yezidis.

Most likely the first reference to the Yezidis can be found in Sharastānī’s (d. 1153) *Kitāb al-milal wa’l-niḥal* (*The Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects*). A contemporary of Sheikh ‘Adī mentioned a sect of Kharijites originating from one Yazīd bin ‘Unayza. Sam‘ānī (d. 1167) in his *Kitāb al-ansāb* (*The Book of Pedigrees*) described the same group as descendants of Yazīd bin Mu‘āwiya, i.e. belonging to the Umayyad dynasty. He mentioned Hulwān and Sinjar as places where they lived.¹⁴ The notion that the Yezidis descended from the generally unpopular Caliph Yazīd, who was not elected but appointed caliph and whose armies killed Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī, is often given as a reason for the persecution of Yezidis in Syria.

Sufism was and still is very popular in Kurdistan and adjacent areas, with the Naqshbandīya and Qādirīya as the two most important orders. Sufis represented a symbiosis between traditional religious forms and Islam in recently converted areas. Thus, it is not surprising to find similarities with a Sufi order in the early history of Yezidism. Sheikh ‘Adī, who apparently founded his own order, the ‘Adawiya, was a contemporary of Sheikh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Gīlānī (d.1166), the founder of the Qādirīya Order. Gīlānī, as well as other famous Sufis such as Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, are still very popular among the Yezidis.¹⁵

With the establishment of the ‘Adawiya as a separate Sufi order in the 11th century, the number of references to the Yezidis in Islamic sources increased quickly. Another explanation for this is the positive attitude of some Muslim Kurdish rulers in Damascus, Aleppo and Mosul towards the community, which however changed drastically when Badr ad-Dīn Lu’lu’ became the Atabeg of Mosul in 1234 and started to fight the ‘Adawiya and persecute the Yezidis. After the death of their leaders Sheikh ‘Adī and Sheikh Ḥasan, the community split into two fractions. One moved to Egypt and Syria under the

¹² Jasim E. Murad, *The Sacred Poems of the Yazidis: an Anthropological Approach* (PhD, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993).

¹³ Rudolf Frank, *Scheich ‘Adi, der große Heilige der Jezidis* (Berlin, 1911) summarized the early Islamic sources.

¹⁴ Anis Frayha, “New Yezidi Texts from Beled Sinjar, Iraq”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 66 (1949): 20.

¹⁵ Victoria Arakelova, “Sufi Saints in the Yezidi Tradition I: Qawlē Ḥusēyīnī Ḥalāj”, *Iran and the Caucasus* 5 (2001): 183–192.

leadership of Zayn ad-Dīn and later ʿIzz ad-Dīn, both descendants of Sheikh ʿAdī, where they continued following the Sufi tradition.¹⁶ Based on the description of Febvre, Nelida Fuccaro argues that the community in Syria maintained their typical Sufi character until the 17th century, i.e. that the master-disciple relationship outweighed the caste-structure of Yezidi society.¹⁷

Other descendants of Sheikh ʿAdī remained in the Mosul area and established the new Yezidi character of the community, who was taught by Sheikh Ḥasan. However, it is necessary to highlight the relationship by blood of both leaders, which connects the origin of the Syrian community with the one in Mosul.

Only in the works of Bar Hebraeus (d.1286), the famous Syrian-Jacobite bishop, do we find a note on the survival of the community after the two devastating blows dealt to them by the Mongols and Badr ad-Dīn Luʿuʿ. For the first time the Yezidis in Jabal Simʿān are now mentioned, which is part of present day Kūrd Dāgh, and whose origins Bar Hebraeus connected to the Kurdish troops of Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn al-ʿAyūbī, the sultan, general and liberator of Jerusalem of Kurdish origin.¹⁸

Ibn Taymīyya's (d. 1328) commented on the Yezidis, too, in *al-risāla al-ʿadawīyya*.¹⁹ Given his authority in Islamic orthodoxy it is noteworthy that he did not criticize the Yezidis for being unbelievers, but for being deviant and extremist in their veneration for Yazīd and Sheikh ʿAdī. This is an accusation, however, which has been widely used to condemn Sufis in general.²⁰

The next evidence of ancient Yezidi existence in Syria can be found in Ottoman archival files from Raqqā²¹ as well as in the Kurdish chronicle *Sharafnāme*. It was written by the Emir of Bitlis, Sharaf ad-Dīn Khān between 1588 and 1596 and describes in detail the history of seven major Yezidi tribes. The *Sharafnāme* also provides information about the number of Yezidis and their settlement areas. For example, it reports on Yezidis whose origins are said to go back to the Ḥakkārī-regiments of Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn who

¹⁶ Lescot, *Enquête*, 112 reported on a Yezidi community in Quṣayr in the early 13th century. This leads Philip Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism: Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition* (New York: Lewiston, 1995), 42 to argue that the tribes living closer to the religious center in Ḥakkārī/Lālīsh converted earlier.

¹⁷ Nelida Fuccaro, "A 17th Century Travel Account on the Yazidis", *Annali* 53/3 (1993): 241–253.

¹⁸ Bar Hebraeus, *Chronology*. Ed. Paul Bedjan, translated by E. Budge, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932); John S. Guest, *Survival among the Kurds: a History of the Yezidis* (London, New York: Kegan Paul, 1993), 45.

¹⁹ Ibn Taymīyya, "al-Risāla al-ʿAdawīya", in *Majmūʿat al-rasāʾil al-kubrā*, vol. 1 (Cairo, 1906/1323), after Michiel Leezenberg, *Political Islam among the Kurds*. Paper originally prepared for the International Conference "Kurdistan: The unwanted state", March 29–31, 2001 (Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland, 2001), 21. See also Y. Michot, *Ibn Taymīyya Against Extremisms* (Beirut, Paris: Albouraq, 2012), 21–22.

²⁰ Leezenberg, *Political Islam*, 3–4.

²¹ Stefan Winter, "The Province of Raqqā under Ottoman Rule, 1535–1800", Paper presented at the Great Lakes Ottomanist Workshop, Toronto, March 18, 2006. Seven of the Ottoman court files contain a reference to Yezidi rebels in the Raqqā region.

had granted one Ḥakkārī Sheikh named Mend the region around the castle of Qusayr west of Aleppo, where many Yezidis lived. The socio-religious caste of Sheikh Mend is to this day very popular in the region.²² Another insightful account came from the Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi (d. 1682), who visited Yezidi communities in Sinjar.²³

The next chapter in studying or dealing with the Yezidis in Syria began in the middle of the 17th century, when for the first time European scholars, namely French clerics, dealt with the Yezidis in the vicinity of Aleppo. The Yezidis in Western Syria came under the influence of French missionaries of the Order of the Capuchins, who, protected by powerful consuls, originally aimed to proselytize Nestorian and Jacobite Christians. Contact with the Yezidis was established by Armenian Christians, which quickly led to the baptism of several Yezidis. From the Yezidi perspective, this seemed to be the perfect opportunity to abandon the status of an unprotected minority and to become an officially recognized *millet*. In order to obtain this status they proactively contacted representatives of different Christian groups in the area. These were aside from the Catholic Capuchins and the Armenians, also English Protestants. They proposed that they would convert to the denomination which provided the best protection. The various contacts created a close relationship between the Monks and the Yezidis as described in Febvre's detailed account. However, internal disputes among the different orders of the Capuchins, Jesuits, and Carmelites aborted the efforts of strengthening the Christian-Yezidi relationship.

From now on news about the Yezidi community found their way to Europe more frequently. In 1674 the first book on the Yezidis was published in Rome.²⁴ The author Michel Febvre described social relations and conventions including many ethnological and geographical details. He described, for example, how the Yezidis were living as nomads between the 'Afrīn River and Jabal Sim'ān. Further, he mentioned how one of their important religious doctrines was not to pronounce the name of the devil. He also mentioned the unique Yezidi caste-system with laymen and clerics. The Whites (laymen) or *murīd* as well as the Blacks (clergy) or *feqīr* were distinguished by their dress code, with the *feqīr* wearing the *khirqā*, the traditional black Sufi shirt.²⁵ However he only

²² John S. Guest, *Survival*, 45; Lescot, *Enquête*, 206.

²³ On Çelebi account see Theodor Menzel, "Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis des Sindschar und seiner Bewohner. Aus Ewlija Tschalebis grossem Reisewerke [Sijahat-name]", in: *Meine Vorderasienexpedition 1906 und 1907* by Hugo Grothe, (Leipzig: K.W. Hiersemann, 1911), 194–211; and Martin Van Bruinessen, "Kurdistan in the 16th and 17th centuries, as reflected in Evliya Çelebi's Seyahatname", *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* 3 (2000): 1–11.

²⁴ It took until 1681 until an expanded edition under the title of *Teatro della Turcia* was distributed across Europe. The author, the same Michel Febvre, received his information mainly from two monks working in the area, Père Jean-Baptiste de Saint Aignan and Père Justinien de Neury. See Fucarro, *Travel Account*.

²⁵ On clothes and other sacred objects among the Yezidis, see Eszter Spät, *Images and objects of the supernatural and sacred objects among the Kurdish Yezidis*. http://www.personal.ceu.hu/students/09/Eszter_Spat/index.htm, 2009.

recognized the *feqīr* as a member of the clergy and did not mention *sheikh* or *pīr*, the other two religious castes in Yezidism. It seems that the *feqīr* caste initially was not separated, but remained open to all qualified Yezidis. Hence, this might be the reason why marriage restrictions among Yezidis in Western Syria are less rigid and not enforced as is being done in the other communities. To break with the tradition of endogamy is still considered a major sin in the eyes of most other Yezidi groups.

In the following years, more European missionaries, explorers and merchants traveled through the area and brought with them additional news about the Yezidis to Europe. For example, a Russian traveler reported on the Yezidis in the 'Afrīn-Valley that they lived as a nomadic group and had two leaders, one secular leader called *amīr* and the other a religious leader.²⁶ These reports contained information about the ways of life, material culture and difficult relations of the Yezidis with their Muslim neighbors. Since many of the informants of the Europeans were Muslims, much prejudice and negative stereotyping of the Yezidis was introduced into Western sources and scholarship.

It took another 100 years until the Yezidis again became the center of Western attention. This happened during the massacres of Christians and Yezidis in the middle of the 18th century in Kurdish territories under Ottoman control. In the aftermath, the area was exposed to increased missionary activities from American and Anglican churches, which in return led to further attacks on the already decimated communities. On the other hand, these missionaries collected much information about the history and religion of the Yezidis. So did the British Euphrates Expedition (1834–37), whose prominent members Ainsworth and Rassam became powerful protectors of the Yezidis in Northern Mesopotamia. Western powers, such as England, France or Russia established consulates in the area. Missionaries (Grant, Badger), explorers (Layard, Botta) and diplomats (Siouffi²⁷, Kartshov) built friendly relationships with local Yezidi leaders and conducted empirical research. In particular, the works of Layard shaped the Yezidi image in the West during the 18th century. The popular German writer Karl May used Layard's *Niniveh and its Remains* as a source for his book *Durchs wilde Kurdistan*, which gave a positive image of the Yezidis in Germany that lasted for generations.

The 18th and 19th centuries, however, found the Yezidis in the Syrian Jazīra at the bottom end of the local political, social and moral order. They did not belong to the *ahl al-kitāb*, people of the book, like Christians and Jews, who enjoyed degrees of autonomy regarding their religious and administrative affairs within the Ottoman millet system. As ethnic Kurds, they faced Ottoman taxation and conscription. The Yezidis in Jabal Sim'ān (as the area was commonly known then) did not suffer from Ottoman persecution in the same way as their fellow Yezidis in the Jazīra; but many of them were

²⁶ Paul Perdrizet, "Documents du XVII^e siècle relatifs de Yezidis", *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de l'Est*, (1903): 433. after Fucarro, *Travel Account*, 246.

²⁷ Nicolas Siouffi, "Notice sur le Cheikh 'Adi et la secte de Yezidis", *Journal Asiatique* 8/5 (1885), 78–98, demonstrated that Sheikh Adi was a historical figure and a Sufi saint.

conscripted and some of them were sent to distant places, like Yemen, from where they never returned. Apparently, the Yemen episode is still prominent in Yezidi memory. It was narrated to me several times, when I asked about the distribution of Yezidi communities.²⁸

According to Siouffi, at the end of the 19th century a representative of the *feqîr* caste lived in Aleppo, who was addressed as *kak* (brother).²⁹ Jullien mentioned between 10,000 and 15,000 Yezidis in northern Syria until Aleppo,³⁰ a relatively high number which should include the Yezidis west of Aleppo. A large Yezidi community was also found in Damascus, which faced hostility from the Arab Sunni population because of their involvement in the massacres of 1860 and the Syrian Revolution of 1925.³¹ In 1905, the region of Jabal Sim'ân was visited by Gertrude Bell, a British traveler and politician, who was accompanied by Yezidi guards and leaders. They conveyed basic information to her, in particular about the issue of sun worship.³²

The Mandate Period³³

After the end of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of British and French mandates in the area, the political borders of Syria were re-defined at subsequent conferences in San Remo, London, and Lausanne. The result was an official split-up of the Kurdish territories which ended in the separation of the Western Yezidi community from their main homeland. The border between Syria and Turkey followed the tracks of the Baghdad Railway, which led to the creation of three Kurdish enclaves around Aleppo, 'Ayn al-'Arab, and the Jazīra. Those enclaves were separated from each other by hundreds of kilometers, which made personal and economical communication increasingly difficult. From now on it was almost impossible to maintain regular contacts with the sanctuaries and leaders in newly established Iraq. In some cases, for example in the

²⁸ See also Henri Lammens, "Le massif du Gabal Sim'an et les Yézidis de Syrie", *Mélange de la Faculté Orientale*, 2 (1907): 366–96.

²⁹ Siouffi, *Notice*, 93 after Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 134.

³⁰ R.P.M. Jullien, *Sinai et Syrie. Souvenirs bibliques et chrétiens* (Lille: Desclee de Brouwer, 1893), 17.

³¹ al-Ḥāsibī, Muḥammad Abū as-Sa'ūd, "Mudhakkirāt", in *Bilād al-shām fī-l-qarn at-tāsi' 'ashar* ed. by Suhayl Zakkār (Damascus, 1982), 493. and New York Times, June 2, 1926.

³² See the Gertrude Bell Archive at www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk

³³ On the general history of the Kurds during the French Mandate see P. Rondot, "Les Kurdes de Syrie", *La France méditerranéenne et africaine*, 1/4 (1938): 81–126; P. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (London: Tauris, 1987); Nelida Fuccaro, "Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism in Mandatory Syria: Politics, Culture and Identity", in *Essays on the origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. by Abbas Vali (Costa Verde, CA: Mazda Publications, 2002): 191–217; Vahe Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie: aux confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l'Irak, 1919–1933* (Paris: Karthala, 2004); and Jordie Tejel, "The Terrier Plan and the emergence of a Kurdish policy under the French Mandate in Syria, 1926–1936 (Report)", *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 21/1–2 (2007): 93–109.

village of Serē Kāniye ('Ayn al-'Arab) or Darbāsīya, the new borderline was drawn directly through existing settlements cutting them in half and placing them under two different political and legal authorities.

French rule in Syria brought two new political concepts to the Kurds and Yezidis: Autonomy and decentralization. These played a major role in the development of a Kurdish national identity, which was further strengthened by the immigration of Turkish and Iraqi Kurds after failed revolts against the new political leadership. Yezidis in the Jazīra were drawn into these events and started to develop their own identity, both religiously and politically. However, they were mainly influenced by events and encounters of the Yezidis in the Sinjar Mountain with British authorities in Iraq.³⁴

French rule gave previously disadvantaged groups the opportunity for participation and self-organization. Like other religious minorities (Druzes, Alawites, Maronites), the Kurds/Yezidis were ready to serve in special Mandate troops. This offered a unique chance to escape from economic misery and a rare opportunity to advance within the social hierarchy. Yezidis took advantage of this chance and were overrepresented with regard to the total population. In 1930, they measured with 0.06% of the total Syrian population, but they counted for 0.2% of the Special Forces.³⁵

However, because most Yezidis were illiterate, only a few actually were acquitted. It was custom that only members of the ruling Sheikh lineage were permitted to attend school. Community leaders feared that attending school would lead to further Islamiization or Christianization of their children. It took Yezidi activists many years to overcome this age-old tradition. The logical consequence was to establish their own schools, which they did in the village of Tall Khatūn. However, since no official permit was issued and anti-Yezidi resentments grew, the school was closed a few years later. But it was regarded as a first step toward a distinct Yezidi approach towards religious education, a struggle that would last for several decades.³⁶

Lammens offered the number of 3,000 Yezidis in the Kūrd Dāgh area at the beginning of the 20th century, which he said was confirmed by his informants.³⁷ Fuccaro

³⁴ For a detailed description of Yezidis in the Sinjar during the British mandate period, see Nelida Fuccaro, *The other Kurds: Yazidis in colonial Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris: 1999).

³⁵ N.E. Bou-Nacklie, "Les Troupes Speciales: Religious and Ethnic Recruitment, 1916–46", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1993): 651; Lescot, *Enquête*, 209–210.

³⁶ Issa describes the establishment of the first Yezidi school: His grandfather, Shemo Issa, lived in Shalhūmiya, a predominantly Christian village near Tur Abdin and the Turkish border. When his parents wanted to send him to school, the Yezidi community resisted and accused the family of collaborating with the Christians and Muslims in order to proselytize the Yezidis. However, after the local Yezidi cleric, Pēshimām Sulaymān intervened, for the first time, a Yezidi who was not of the Sheikh Hassan lineage was allowed to go to school. Later, Shemo Issa became the first Yezidi school teacher. Without the necessary permits and outside funding, he started the first school for Yezidi children in Tall Khatūn. The project was legitimized by Pēshimām Sulaymān of the Sharafdīn lineage. (Chaukedin Issa, et. al., *Das Yezidentum — Religion und Leben* (Oldenburg: Denge Ezidiya Verlag, 2007), 22.)

³⁷ Lammens, *Le massif*, 386.

cited an unofficial census from 1937 which listed 1,082 Yezidis in the Jabal Akrād, 87 in the Hasaka region and 797 in al-Qāmishlī.³⁸ Zakariya in 1945 mentioned 700 families with an estimated size of five members, which adds up to 3,500 individuals.³⁹ The French Mandate administration then conducted a census, in which the Yezidis made up 10 percent of the Kurdish population of 200,000.⁴⁰

During the first years of the mandate, Syria became a safe haven for Kurdish refugees from Turkey and Iraq, who had to flee their homelands after failed nationalist uprisings. Among them were Yezidis from Sinjar who found refuge with their Syrian brothers. Similar to the situation in neighboring countries, Syrian Kurdish intellectuals as well as *aghbas* and tribal leaders from the Jazīra established a well-organized autonomy movement.⁴¹ However, their movement and agenda were not supported by Yezidi Kurds, mainly due to the lack of an educated class among them. Only some individuals both from the Kūrd Dāgh and the Jazīra supported the national movement and thus contributed to the development of Kurdish nationalism in the region. They were members and subscribers of *Hawar*,⁴² a journal devoted to the Kurdish cause published between 1932 and 1943 by Jalālāt Badrkhān. The journal used the Latin script, which widened the cultural gap between the Yezidis in Syria and Iraq, the latter using the Arabic script. However, during this time, the Kurdish areas in Syria witnessed a period of cultural enlightenment through the publishing of Kurdish newspapers, airing of radio programs in Kurdish and the maintaining of specific customs and traditions in everyday (clothing) as well as artistic expression. Leading Kurdish intellectuals and writers, such as Badrkhān and Cēgerkhwīn, used the freedom of expression to publish articles and poems related to the Yezidis.

Influences from Turkey and Iraq

Despite the newly drawn political borders, limited contacts between the Yezidis in the Jazīra and Sinjar continued; however, this happened mostly in the form of a one-way-movement into French territory. After gaining nominal independence in 1932, the national government in Iraq immediately began to enforce the conscription law on religious minority groups like the Yezidis. In addition, Yezidi sanctuaries had to be registered as Islamic endowments, *waqf*. In response, the Yezidis in Sinjar under Dawūd al-Dawūd rebelled against the central government. During the military skirmishes, many villages were destroyed, Yezidis killed and others sentenced to long prison terms, some

³⁸ 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* 29/4 (1997): 579–580.

³⁹ Zakariya, Aḥmad Waṣfī, *ʿAshbāʾir*, 673.

⁴⁰ Cited after Fuccaro, *Nationalism*, 194.

⁴¹ See Fuccaro, *Nationalism* (2002); Vahe Tachjian, *La France en Cilicie*; and Jordie Tejel, *Syria's Kurds. History, Politics, and Society*, (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁴² See Zengi at www.yekiti.nl/html/erebi/dilawer1.htm

even executed. A larger group including leader Dawūd al-Dawūd managed to escape to Syria, where their descendants can still be found near the city of ʿĀmūda⁴³. Others followed their example and voluntarily moved to Syria, thus using the creation of the new states to their advantage. Syrian Yezidi leaders, such as Jamīl Shamū from ʿAfrīn and Sheikh Khidr from the Qīrān tribe lobbied and negotiated with the French authorities in order to allow other Iraqi Yezidis to follow. Up to 10,000 Yezidis wanted to move to Syrian territory to escape the conflict with the Iraqi government.⁴⁴

In April 1939, Sheikh Khalaf, supreme leader of the Hāskān tribes, led some of his tribal groups into al-Qāmishlī, with French permission. However, three years later, large contingents of refugees had to return to Iraq after the political tensions between the mandate powers had eased up. Hence, it is noteworthy that the border at this time was relatively open and the migration of entire groups and communities was still possible. It was in the interest of the French, who had their headquarters in al-Ḥasaka, to encourage large-scale resettlement of Yezidi groups. This would create another small and decentralized minority canton, but also offered economic stimulus to the area, because Sinjar Yezidis were well-known skilled farmers. Otherwise, the region between al-Ḥasaka and al-Qāmishlī was dominated by nomadic groups.

In contrast to earlier practices, the new refugees were not granted land allocations, but had to rely on tribal and religious support. Even Dawūd al-Dawūd had to ask for permission to settle with his relatives in ʿĀmūda.⁴⁵ High taxation and custom fees prevented the Sinjar Yezidis from bringing their herds. French Mandate authorities were worried that the Yezidis would become too influential, especially considering the possible introduction of a Syrian recruitment law.

The Yezidis in the Sheikhan district in Iraq remained quiet during the rebellions. And after the defeat of the Sinjari Yezidis, the Sheikhan leaders, in particular Mayān Khatūn, mother of Mīr Saʿīd Beg, were ready to take control of the Sinjar Yezidis. After the death of their charismatic leaders Ismāʿīl Beg and Hamū Shirū and the expulsion of Dawūd al-Dawūd, no one remained to oppose these challenges. Only Ismāʿīl's son, Yazīd Khān rose against Mīr Saʿīd Beg in 1937/38. However, the death sentence, which he was given for his rebellion against the Yezidi authorities, could not be carried out because Mīr Saʿīd Beg was shot down by his sister Wansa, the wife of Yazīd Khān. Eventually, she fled to Syria, to the Yezidi communities in ʿAfrīn. French authorities granted her asylum to stay in Aleppo. Only two years later, during World War Two, she was deported back to Baghdad because as a refugee she could provide no proper paperwork and documentation.⁴⁶

⁴³ Lescot, *Enquête*, 190–195.

⁴⁴ Fuccaro, *Ethnicity*, 569.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 573.

⁴⁶ John S. Guest, *Survival*, 190–191.; E.S. Drower, *Peacock angel: being some account of votaries of a secret cult and their sanctuaries* (London: J. Murray's, 1941), 106–107.

Other Kurds came to Syria from Turkey after several nationalist revolts there were crushed, such as the Sheikh Sa'īd rebellion 1925–28, the rebellion at Ararat in 1930 or Dersim in 1937–38. In Syria they continued their political and military activities. The largest political organization *Khoybūn* had for many years its headquarters in Damascus and branches in Aleppo and al-Ḥasaka. *Khoybūn* was the first pan-Kurdish association that tried to combine nationalist ideas with the heterogeneous tribal society of Kurds and Yezidis. The association also idealized Yezidism as the only true religion of the Kurds, without however including prominent Yezidi members.⁴⁷ Hajo Agha, the leader of the Heverkān tribal confederation that included many Yezidi clans, organized *Khoybūn* activities in al-Ḥasaka. He was in close contact with Ismā'īl Beg Cōl, the Sinjar Yezidi leader, who tried several times to become the overall leader of the Yezidis in the name of *Khoybūn*.⁴⁸ After Hajo returned from Turkey in 1930, he settled with his Syrian Yezidi fellows and with French support in Syria and built the city of Tirbe Spī. They also obtained identity cards and in some cases land allocations. Other Yezidi families from both sides of the border followed suit and added to the demographic, but not economic growth of the community during this time, for example people from the village of Kiwekh in Turkey now settled on the Syrian side of the border. Issa provides a lively account of the quarrels among the various Yezidi, Kurdish, Turkish and Arab groups in the 1920's:

Disputes occurred mainly between the Heverkān and other Kurdish tribes that collaborated with Turkish authorities. The cause of the conflict was the age-old enmity between the Yezidi Shamdīn Cōli from the Dāsikān tribe and the Muslim Kurd 'Alī Hassa, who was a land owner in Tall Sagān. 'Alī Hassa approached the local Turkish authorities in Nusaybin with the request to expel the Yezidis from the Tur Abdin region. For this, he would provide the soldiers and supplies. The Heverkān, which included many Yezidi families, placed their fighters under the command of Hajo and his oldest son Hasan and sent their women, children and elderly to Merbab. Then they took position around Bagok Mountain. Initially, the Turkish army did not take the Yezidis seriously and sent only a small unit to break the resistance. However, the Yezidis killed the commander of the troops. After this incident, the Turkish authorities pressured other Kurdish Muslim tribes into joining the Turkish troops against the Heverkān. These tribes included the Saliha, Domanah, Dorlah, Seyde Memolanah and others. Those, who supported Hajo and the Heverkān were the Afsī, Bahminmān, Mihokān, Dāsikān and Kiwekhān. They also featured several women, for example, Halīma and Adūle from Hajo's family, who encouraged their fighters. The battle started at dawn and lasted the entire day. Over 100

⁴⁷ Martin Van Bruinessen, „Nationalisme kurde et ethnicités intra-kurdes”, *Peuples Méditerranéens*, 68–69 (1994): 36 mentioned informants, who claimed that Hajo, leader of the Heverkān tribe and member of *Khoybūn*, was himself a Yezidi.

⁴⁸ Fucarro, *The other Kurds*, 13; Martin Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: the social and political structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 101–105.

Turkish soldiers were killed in the attempt to conquer Merbab and take the women and children there hostage. The governor of Nusaybin, Qudur Bek had to intervene in order to reach a cease fire. Some years later, in 1926, the Yezidis were again attacked by Turkish troops and their allies. This time they were outgunned and had to surrender after a long siege of their stronghold on Mount Bagok. Of the 250 prisoners, only two children survived the massacre. Fighters, such as Hajo and his sons, Shamdīn Cōli, Meke Shamū, Omar Khālīd and other Yezidi tribal leaders were able to flee across the border to the Syrian village of Tirbi Spī (Qubūr Bīd), where they sought asylum with the French authorities.⁴⁹

Only little is recorded about the situation of the Yezidis in 'Afrīn during the French Mandate. It is necessary to mention that the region retained its character as a closed socio-economic unit, whose inhabitants had settled there for centuries. The Yezidis were part of this region. Kurds in 'Afrīn regarded the new French rulers differently; some supported them, while others rejected the French Mandate. Some Yezidis fought actively against French authorities and promoted Kurdish national interests, such as Darwīsh Shamū, leader of the village 'Arsh Qībar. Darwīsh Shamū was a member of *Khoybūn* and opened the first Yezidi school in the Kūrd Dāgh inside his house in 1926. The teacher, Khidr Jum'a was brought from Iraq⁵⁰. However, after the conflict with the mandate power intensified, Darwīsh Shamū became a partisan and went to the mountains. During one of the skirmishes with French troops he met his brother Omar, who served in the French Special Forces. Shamū was killed in 1928 in blood revenge.⁵¹ His son Jamīl Agha became the new leader of the community; however only in the political and not religious sense. Jamīl Agha resided in Qatma, but he was also involved in the development of 'Afrīn. In 1926, he was appointed the first mayor of 'Afrīn, and one of his accomplishments was the establishment of a weekly market. All of these events signify the deep involvement of the Yezidi community in local affairs. They also speak about the significantly higher position of the Yezidis within the social hierarchy of the Kūrd Dāgh.

No evidence was found that linked the Murīd Movement, an active Sufi movement in the Kūrd Dāgh under the leadership of Ibrāhīm Khalīl to the Yezidis.⁵² However, the entire area witnessed an increasing Islamization, where individuals, families and sometimes entire villages were forced to convert. Many Yezidis used the religious principle of *taqīya* that permitted the faithful to deny their true religion in case of danger. Others gave up their religion, because they saw an economic and social advantage, something Yezidism was unable to offer. Religious ceremonies and instruction were

⁴⁹ Issa, *Das Yezidentum*, 172–174. Issa's account is based on oral narratives that only partly comply with the information from written sources and archive material. According to them, it was Hajo who started a revolt against the Turks in 1926 and immigrated to Syria after the defeat.

⁵⁰ Interview with Murād Umar Junayd, Qastal Jindū, 2006.

⁵¹ Lescot, *Enquête* 210.

⁵² On the Muridiyya Movement see Lescot "Le Kurd Dagh et le Mouvement Mouroud", *Studia Kurdica*, vol. 1–5 (1988): 101–126.

difficult to maintain due to the lack of trained clerics. In addition, the *qawwāl*⁵³ who were supposed to visit the Yezidi communities annually during the *tawwāf*⁵⁴ rarely traveled to 'Afrīn. As mentioned earlier, this led to resentments among Yezidis from the Jazīra and Iraq. Even the young Mīr Taḥsīn Beg doubted the seriousness of religious practice in 'Afrīn.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Yezidis from 'Afrīn continuously tried to revive contacts with the Yezidis in the mainland. Jamīl Agha for example had close relations with Ismā'īl Beg Cōl until his death. Mīr Sa'īd Beg spent a few days in 1933 in 'Arsh Qībar, and Dawūd al-Dawūd paraded through the village in 1936.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Until the end of the Mandate period, both Syrian Yezidi communities were able to maintain their position within the regional minority context. This was possible due to the growing Kurdish nationalist movement and its temporary support by the French authorities. However, as a result the Yezidis drifted into a clash of loyalties between nationalist (Kurdish and Arabic), colonial (French and British), and Islamic movements. The growth of the Kurdish national movement in Syria and neighboring countries, the often militarist response of their governments as well as the increasing Islamization of the entire society led to a permanent weakening of the traditional structure of the community and brought them to the verge of extinction.

Syrian Yezidis developed a unique identity among the other minority groups. As ethnic Kurds they had similar experiences with Ottoman, French and Arab ruling elites, who tried to extend their hegemony over Kurdish territories. Hence, Yezidis were treated like other Kurdish groups. However, their status as a heterodox religious minority contributed significantly to their persecution and their subsequent relegation to the bottom end of the social hierarchy. Very little outside support was noted, as well as very little Kurdish solidarity.

However, due to the physical separation of the settlement area two different developments unfolded, with long-lasting consequences with regard to the formation of Yezidi religious and social identity in Syria: Yezidis from the Kūrd Dāgh consider themselves and are considered by others as different from their brothers and sisters in the Syrian Jazīra. The proximity or distance to the religious centers of the group in Northern Iraq fostered this dichotomy as did the lack of interaction between the groups. With Syrian Yezidis generally being stigmatized as heretics by the society at large, Yezidis from

⁵³ On the religious caste of the *qewāl*, their functions and history, see Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 132–133 and Issa, *Das Yezidentum*, 87–92.

⁵⁴ *Tawwāf* is the annual celebration in honor of the local Yezidi saint. *Tawwāf* is also the annual journey of the *qawwāl* to the various Yezidi communities for religious instruction and collection of dues. One of the sacred objects that were carried around during *tawwāf* was associated with the 'Afrīn branch.

⁵⁵ Sadiq Damlūjī, *al-Yazidīya* (Mossul: Matba'at al-Ittiḥād, 1949), 251.

⁵⁶ Lescot, *Enquête* (1938), 216.

the Jazīra were also (mis)-treated as such outcasts. Yezidis from the Kūrd Dāgh experienced this much less. The self-perceptions of the two groups reflect this dual approach. While Yezidis from the Jazīra incorporate the issue of victimization in their identity building, Yezidis from the Kūrd Dāgh draw on their partial integration into society in order to create a more assertive, proud Yezidi identity.

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