

SHI'ISM

IN EUROPEAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN CONTEXTS

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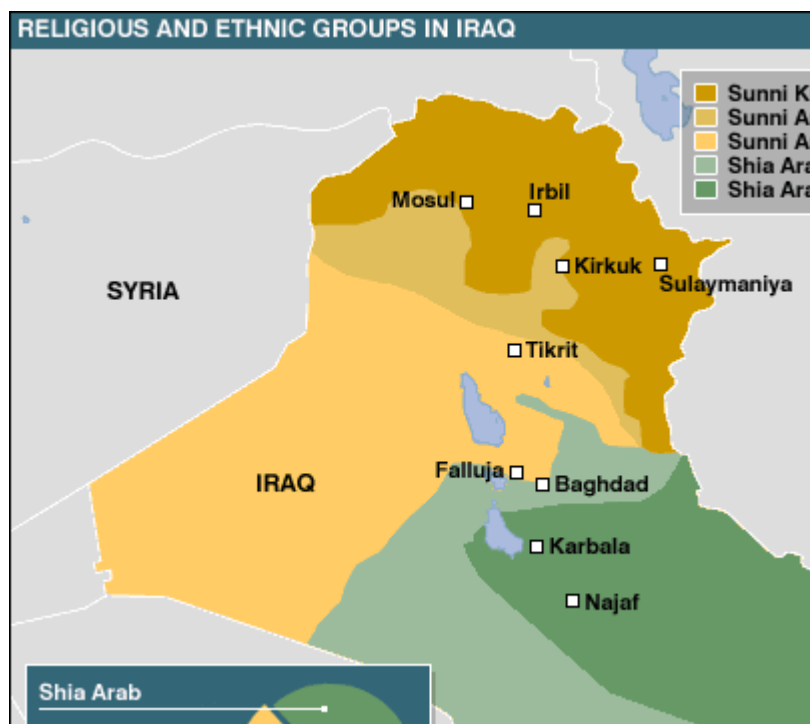
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Relations Between Yezidis and Shi'a in the New Millennium

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The Iraqi population in 2020 reached forty million and one hundred fifty thousand people, according to the official statistics announced by the Iraqi Ministry of Planning in January 2021.¹ According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and estimates made in 2015, Muslims account for 95-98% of the total Iraqi population (Shi'a 64-69%, Sunni 29-34%) and Christians account for 1% (divided between Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and the Assyrian Church in the East). The rest of the population constitutes between 1 and 4% overall; among them are Yezidis, Shabaks, Sabians and Yarsan.²



Source: BBC News

¹ Iraq population exceeds 40 million people, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2021/1/12/>.

² CIA Report 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/#people-and-society>.

The death of Al-Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī

The Shi‘a Muslims belong to the *Ahl al-Bayt* and follow the fourth Rashidun (rightly-guided) caliph, ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib, who is the cousin and son-in-law of prophet Muhammad. Because of Ali’s delay in obtaining the caliphate after the death of the prophet, a sharp conflict arose between his followers and the Rashidun caliphs, especially with the Banū Uthman. After the killing of caliph ‘Othman ibn ‘Affān, ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib took over the caliphate in 656 AD in Medina. He then moved to Kufa, transferring the capital of the caliphate there, and remained in that city until his death, i.e. 661 AD. Once ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib died, Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān took the caliphate from 661 to 680 CE - when he died - and chose Damascus as the capital of the newly born Umayyad state.³

Mu‘āwiya’s successor, Yazid ibn Mu‘āwiya (680-683 CE), received the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus. He sent in that same year an army led by ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād towards Iraq to fight Al-Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib, the son of ‘Alī who claimed to be the legitimate caliph successor. The two sides met in the Battle of Karbala 680 CE, which ended with the defeat and death of Imam Al-Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī⁴. That incident was the beginning of a long-term conflict between the two groups, Sunni and Shi‘a, which after more than 1,340 years is still alive and evident today, with all its side-effects.

The Yezidi minority

Yezidis are a religious minority of the Kurdish ethnic group. Most of them live in the Iraqi Kurdistan and in northern Iraq, but they are also present in Syria, Turkey, Armenia and Georgia. Outside their region of origin, some Yezidis can also be found in the United States and Europe, especially in Germany, where more than half of this community in diaspora live there. The total number of followers of this religion, according to the estimates, is less than a million⁵. The largest part of this community populates four large regions of northern Iraq: Sheikhan, Dohuk, Ba‘shiqqa/Bahzani and Sinjar.

The first appearance of the Yezidis on the historical scene dates back to the 12th century. They were an isolated community in the Kurdish mountains of northern Iraq. Originally they had to be the heirs of a variety of cultural and religious beliefs and practices, including old Iranian and Mesopotamian cults⁶. They later became the supporters and followers of the Sufi scholar Sheikh ‘Adī⁷. Thus, a syncretic new doctrine and a unique religious belief system grew up.

³ C. Brockelmann, *History of the Islamic Peoples*, Beirut 1968.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ S. Zoppellaro, *Il genocidio degli yezidi*, Guerini e associati, Milano 2017.

⁶ P. Kreyenbroek, K. Omarkhali, *Introduction to the special issue: Yezidism and Yezidi Studies in the early 21st century*, *Kurdish Studies* 4 (2), London, 2016, pp. 122–130.

⁷ Sheikh ‘Adī (1073-1162) is considered an important reformer and renovator of the Yezidi religion. Born in Beyt-Far, in the province of Baalbek, Lebanon, as ‘Adī ibn Musafir bin Ismail bin Musa bin Marwan bin al-Hakim bin Marwan.



The centers of the Yezidis in the Middle East (today).

B. Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion*, I.B. Tauris, London 2017.

According to some scholars, such as R. H. W. Empson, for example, the Yezidi religion should be considered an Islamic sect that emerged from the “official” branch dating back to the end of the seventh century AD. The Yezidis belonged to and originated from the dynasty of Yazid ibn Muawiya, the second ruler of the Umayyad dynasty. For more than 1340 years the Yezidis were accused by many members of the Shi’a of being the ones who killed Al-Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī, so the name of the Yezidis was “cursed” and a prohibition was established against all forms of contact with them.

The Yezidis in Ba’athist Iraq

In recent times (1970), The Kurdish Autonomous Region was established in northern Iraq, more precisely in the governorates of Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah. However, the Yezidi regions remained outside the administrative boundaries of this autonomous entity. Almost all Yezidi regions were subject to a comprehensive Arabization process implemented by the Ba’ath Party regime in the years 1965, 1973-1975, and 1986-1989⁸. Most of their inhabitants were forced to leave their villages and dwell in new collective villages, or “the compounds”, that were mostly located near the lands where they used to reside⁹. Others were transferred to other areas in central and southern Iraq. To suppress the independence desires of the Yezidis and make them dependent on the government,

⁸ B. Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion*, I.B. Tauris, London 2017.

⁹ A. Almikhlafl, *A day in the life of the Yezidis in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region*, <https://ar.qantara.de/content>.

Yezidi villages were destroyed or resettled by the Arabs. Since 1974, the Iraqi government has tried to exclude the Yezidis from the Kurdish society and Kurdish nationalism by declaring that they are descendants of the Arabs and related to the progeny of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid bin Muawiyah. With all these attempts, only a few Yezidis joined the Ba'ath Party, the ruling party in Iraq from 1968 to 2003. Since 1974 and due to the Autonomy Law for the Kurdish regions, the Kurds have been able to teach the Kurdish language in their affiliated schools, but in areas where Arabization was strong, such as the areas where the Yezidis lived, like Sinjar, the Kurdish language was banned like those of other minorities, such as the Syriac and Turkish ones.

Some Yezidis lost their lives during the Anfal campaign in 1988¹⁰ when the Iraqi regime targeted Kurdish civilians. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the Kurds organised revolts against the Iraqi government. After the fierce fighting between the Iraqi forces and the Kurdish ones, the Iraqi government withdrew from the Kurdish region in October 1991. This meant de facto the conquering of independence by the Kurds, which would place them outside the control of Baghdad (the Iraqi Capital) and stay under the name of the Kurdistan Region. After the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, the Kurdish area was splitted, partly becoming the autonomous region of the Kurds and partly falling into Iraq, under the control of Saddam Hussein's government, and thus the Yezidi community was divided into two parts. Roughly 90% of Yezidis live outside the Kurdish safe havens. The entire Sinjar region and a large part of Sheikhan, including its main cities - Ain Sifni, Bahzani and Ba'shiqa - remained under the control of the Iraqi government. Only Lalish¹¹ and Ba'dara, as well as some villages, remained within the Kurdish Autonomous Region.¹²

In early March of 1991, the Shi'a uprising erupted in the South¹³ and during the suppression of the popular uprising, specifically in Najaf and Karbala, the two holy cities, this incident was exploited by the Ba'ath regime to send troops and diverse forces to Shi'a cities to fight against the uprisers. The fact that the latter had mustaches and wore the red kufiya on their heads, in a clear resemblance to the Yezidi character. It was the chance for the official propaganda to spread among the people the idea that they were Yezidis who had come to take revenge on the Shi'a again.

After the 2003 war and the fall of Baghdad into the hands of the Iraqi opposition and the American forces, a new phase of interaction began between the main Iraqi ethnic, cultural and social components: they began to leave many of their previous frictions aside. From these new relationships emerged the communication between the Yezidis and the Shi'a, as many members of the Yezidi component obtained positions in the government and became members of the Iraqi Parliament. Consequently, representatives of the Shi'a and Yezidis came into direct contact by virtue of working closely with the decision-making sources. These included the various political parties and forces as well as the Shi'a and Yezidi religious authorities, "in a special meeting between a group

¹⁰ The Anfal was unleashed against the Kurds from February through September 1988 in the final phase of the Iran-Iraq war. Human Rights Watch estimates that between 50,000 and 100,000 people were killed during al-Anfal; while Kurdish officials have put the number as high as 182,000. M. Galletti, *Storia dei Curdi*, Milano 2014.

¹¹ Lalish, (Laliş in Kurdish), 120 km north ovest of Erbil, is the main spiritual center for Yezidis around the world, and contains the tomb of Sheikh 'Adi

¹² B. Açıkyıldız, *opt., cit.*

¹³ M. Galletti, *Storia dei Curdi*, Jouvence, Milano 2014.

of members of the Iraqi parliament, including some Yezidi representatives with His Eminence, Mr. Ammar Al-Hakim¹⁴, who indicated the extent of his satisfaction with the meeting and affirming his sovereignty to move forward in defending the rights of all the sons of the original Iraqi components, on top of whom is the Yezidi component”.¹⁵ After the establishment of the Federal Republic of Iraq, representatives of minorities assumed important positions in Baghdad within the ministries and the public administration. This official presence gave representatives of the Yezidi community the opportunity to meet and communicate with many Shi’a leaders and references, including Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, thus a new phase of direct relations between the leaders of the two sides has developed.

The Genocide of Yezidis by ISIS

After the wave of the Arab Spring that swept across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, chaos and instability reigned in many regions, especially in Syria. Then militant jihadist groups emerged that took control of cities and towns by force of arms and terror. With the establishment of the so called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its control in mid-2014 over most of the Sunni cities in Iraq¹⁶, and the massacres committed against the Shi’a in the Mosul Governorate, specifically in the Tal Afar district, a mass exodus of Shi’a families arose towards other Iraqi cities, including the Sinjar district. The Yezidis received these families and provided them with urgent assistance, as they were accommodated in homes and schools until they could go to the camps of Najaf and Karbala provinces. This news, among the painful and rapid events that was taking place, was circulated by various media and it led to great sympathy of the Shi’a with the Yezidis.¹⁷

During the summer months of 2014, ISIS incited the displacement of more than half a million people from within Nineveh. Ethno-religious genocide was carried out against members of the Yezidi community¹⁸, women were enslaved into sex and / or forced into marriage, children were forcibly recruited as fighters in the ranks of ISIS and prisoners were forced to convert to Islam.¹⁹ And an organized campaign was led in order to empty the region of religious and ethnic diversity. Yezidis, Christians, Turkmen, Shabak and others faced killings, kidnappings and persecution. These practices against these minorities led to the migration of large numbers out of Iraq, but the majority became

¹⁴ Ammar al-Hakim, an Iraqi politician, Ibn Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, the former president of the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, is currently the secretary of the National Wisdom Movement.

¹⁵ Hussein Hassan Narmo, a Yezidi parliamentarian in the Iraqi Parliament, currently on the PUK list. <https://kitabab.com/2016/10/16/>.

¹⁶ Mosul fell to the Islamic State on June 10, 2014, and a few months later, ISIS managed to gain control of up to a third of Iraqi territory.

¹⁷ S. R. Khairafayi, *The relationship between yezidis and shi’a before and after ISIS*, <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=604331>

¹⁸ OHCHR, *United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria: ISIS is committing genocide against the Yezidis*, <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20113&LangID=A>

¹⁹ On August 3, 2014, ISIS launched a major offensive which led to the fall of Sinjar and the surrounding villages. Nearly 200,000 people were displaced within days, many of them Yezidis. About 50,000 people have taken refuge on Sinjar Mountain. Of the nearly 6,000 people who had disappeared or were kidnapped by ISIS, the fate of about half of them remains unknown. <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2020/08/1059182>

internally displaced. While some have been able to flee to relatively safe areas, others have since resided in highly volatile areas.²⁰

Displacement patterns emerged such that linguistic, religious and / or ethnic convergence determines the choice of the area of displacement. Usually minorities tend to seek protection in areas where their identity resonates in one way or another with the identity of the host community. While some Shi'a minorities used to seek refuge in provinces such as Karbala and Najaf, most Yezidis were displaced from Nineveh to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq or to the Kurdish-controlled parts of northern Nineveh. Christians were displaced to predominantly Christian areas, such as Ainkawa in Erbil and some areas in Baghdad. These patterns of displacement effectively divided many camps into ethnic and / or religious affiliation.²¹

Although the Kurdistan region of Iraq hosts most of the displaced Yezidis, a minority of them reside in different parts of Iraq, especially in the Shi'a areas. These fluctuations in displacement and instability increased the number of visits and initiatives between the Yezidi and Shi'a community, and opened a new page of relations between them. "It is our duty to protect the Yezidis"²² said Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani after the occupation of Sinjar and the genocide committed by the ISIS in August, 2014. On the occasion of the liberation of the Yezidi lands south of Sinjar in 2017²³, the former Yezidi Prince Mîr Tehsîn Seîd Beg said in a press release: "In this genocide committed by the terrorist organization ISIS against us as Yezidis, the positions of the brothers in southern Iraq were honorable, especially the Shi'a brothers, as the historical fatwa issued by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani prohibiting yezidi blood will remain as a historical witness stuck in our minds and their positions are unforgettable."²⁴

Conclusions

During the visit of Pope Francis to Iraq at the beginning of March 2021, a unified interfaith prayer was held in which the Pope participated in the historic and archeological city of Ur in southern Iraq. During the memorial photos monitored by the lenses of the news agencies, what was striking was the wide presence of representatives of different religions and sects²⁵, and the allocation of 4 seats to personalities who sat near the Pope, representing Yezidis, Sabeans, Sunnis and Shi'a. Farouk Khalil, a member of the Yezidi Spiritual Council, from Ba'shiqa, came to participate as a representative of the Yezidi religion, who presented a paper on the reality of the Yezidis and their demands. On the other hand, Jawad al-Khoei, the grandson of the religious authority of the Shi'a community, Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, participated for the Shi'a. It is a rare event for all of these personalities to come together in one session to perform a joint prayer, but it may be the beginning of leaving the differences of the past aside and starting to build a better future for all.

²⁰ L. Higel, *Iraq's Displacement Crisis: Security and protection*, Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, Report of 2016. (p. 17).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Press release on 10 Sep. 2014, <https://www.alalamtv.net/news/>

²³ Kurdish fighters liberated the strategic town of Sinjar in northern Iraq, which was in the hands of ISIS militants, on November 13, 2015, but the villages and southern regions remained in the hands of ISIS until 2017. https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2015/11/151113_kurds_sinjar_entrance_all_directions

²⁴ *Prince of the Yazidis in the world: the positions of the shi'a are honorable and historical evidence will remain stuck in our minds*, <https://www.alshirazi.com/world/news/2017/005/020.htm>

²⁵ *Clergymen sit near the Pope in the historic meeting of Ur*, <http://www.bahzani.net/?p=70153>.

Freedom of religion, belief and religious affiliation means the protection of all individuals of all religious components and sects. There is a need to protect freedom of religion and belief more and to make dialogue and coexistence a primary goal for the various sects, whether they are a minority or a majority. Communication and dialogue are important anywhere, but especially in the religious and cultural fields, such as the importance of making yourself known and communicating with others. Not only to receive information and to discover the other, but precisely to return an image of yourself by sending a clear and direct message to those who live with us, or who are simply curious to know and discover the cultural and spiritual cosmos in which we live daily. How is it possible to be understood, if you do not get involved in discovering a part of yourself by dialoguing and talking with the other?

Wars, violent conflicts, poverty, inequality, and state institutions based on authoritarianism, nationalism and religion are all factors that aid in violations of freedom of religion and belief and contribute to creating an irreparable rift.



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