

Kurds (Kurdmanzh)

Profile

There were a total of 42,139 Kurds registered in the 2001 Census, of which 40,620 were Yezidi Kurds, a culturally distinct group who practise their own religion. It has traces of Islamic, Christian and Zoroastrian religions, and focuses on the worship of the 'Peacock God' Melek Taus. The majority of Yezidis live nomadic lives, tending livestock and moving their animals through alpine pasture. A small number have settled in urban areas such as Yerevan.

Many Sunni Muslim Kurds fell victim to mass expulsion along with the Azeris at the time of the Armenia–Azerbaijan war.

Historical context

Kurds started arriving in Armenia in 1828, fleeing the Russo-Turkish wars, while many other Kurds settled around 1918. Yezidis were not classified separately from other Kurds in Soviet censuses, but since the late 1980s there has been debate in Armenia as to whether Yezidi Kurds constitute a separate ethnic group. Many Yezidis within Armenia claim that they are. They also claim that the Kurmanji dialect is a separate language from Kurdish. However, all Yezidi religious texts are written in Kurdish and most Yezidi communities in other countries do consider themselves to be Kurdish. The debate has split the Yezidi community in Armenia, with some Yezidis rejecting the dissociation with Kurdish identity proposed by some of their number.

Concern has been expressed that there is inadequate representation of the Kurdish minority at national and local levels. In 1998, Kurdish representatives protested that the electoral system makes no special provision for minority representation, with seats in parliament being awarded strictly according to the territorial principle. They proposed amendments to the electoral law allowing for a Kurdish representative to be elected the Armenian National Assembly. However, the proposals faced the problem that Kurds do not form local majorities in any administrative or electoral district and they were not adopted.

Current issues

According to a report prepared for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2004, Yezidis are more likely to suffer lower levels of education than other communities. This is partly because of the poor economic climate, and partly because of the remoteness of many Yezidi villages. Preferential treatment of minorities under the Soviet system has withered away, exacerbating the Yezidis' marginalization.

Internal disputes over whether Yezidis should be classified separately or as Kurds have in turn hampered state sponsorship of Yezidi cultural materials, such as language textbooks, since there does not appear to be consensus within the target community whether its language should be called Kurdish or Kurmanji.

The Armenian government faced strong criticism from one part of the community when it considered ratifying Kurmanji as the name of the language spoken by Kurds/Yezidis in Armenia; it ratified both 'Yezidi' and 'Kurdish' as separate languages under the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.

Yezidi Kurds have expressed concern that they suffer disproportionate hazing during military service compared to other ethnic groups in Armenia. There have also been reports of bullying of Yezidi children in school and discrimination at the hands of local government and law enforcement officials. Yezidi Kurds have also reportedly been disadvantaged in the allocation of privatized land and in the enjoyment of water and grazing rights. Since the early 1990s, Yezidis have migrated to Russia and Germany in search of better lives.

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