

Yezidis

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Profile

All Yezidis are ethnically and linguistically (Kirmanji) Kurdish. The estimated 650,000 Yezidis are concentrated in Jabal Sinjar, 150 kilometres west of Mosul, with a smaller community in Shaikhan, the Kurdistan foothills east of Mosul, where their most holy shrine of Shaykh Adi is located.

The Yezidi religion, with 4,000 year-old origins, seems to be a synthesis of pagan, Zoroastrian, Manichaeian, Jewish, Nestorian Christian and Muslim elements. Yezidis are dualists, believing in a Creator God, now passive, and Malak Ta'us (Peacock Angel), executive organ of divine will. They believe they are descended from Adam but not Eve and are thereby different from the rest of humankind. Excommunication, therefore, has dire implications. Conversely, one cannot become a Yezidi and marriage outside of the community is forbidden. The name probably derives from the Persian *ized* (angel, deity).

The Yezidis are by and large impoverished cultivators and herdsmen who have a strictly graded religio-political hierarchy and tend to maintain a more closed community than other ethnic or religious groups. Historically, they have been subject to sharp persecution owing to their heretical beliefs and practices.

Historical context

Yezidis traditionally were tribally organized. Some tribes were willing to combine in confederation with Muslim and Christian tribes under an acknowledged paramount chief. Until the nineteenth century they were a formidable presence around Mosul, but endured devastating assaults from Sunni Kurdish tribes and Ottoman troops, partly because of the disorder created by Yezidi tribes but also because of growing religious antipathy, heightened by European interest in the Yezidis.

Following the formation of Iraq, the Yezidis proved resistant to both British and Iraqi efforts to extend direct administration to the region. Iraqi efforts to introduce conscription led to repeated risings, notably 1935-40, critically at a time when the Shammar bedouin were encroaching on traditional Yezidi pasturage. Conscription was closely associated with Ottoman rule, removed vital manpower, and exposed Yezidis to cohabitation in barracks with 'sons of Eve'.

The Yezidis have always remained on the fringes of Iraqi society, but because of the strategic position of Jabal Sinjar they received unwelcome attention from Hussein's state security. Under the Ba'ath, repeated efforts were made to Arabize the area and also to persuade Yezidis that they were really Arab. Reaction was mixed, but some Yezidis support the Kurdish national movement. Yezidis reluctantly served in the army against Iran, and the community escaped the Anfal, the Kurdish genocide, 1987-8.

Current issues

During the reign of Saddam Hussein, Yezidis were sometimes considered as Arabs rather than Kurds, and therefore were used as a community that would tilt the balance in the northern Kurdish areas toward Arab control. This politicization of their ethnicity has been detrimental to Yezidi security.

In the wake of the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, Yezidis also faced increased persecution by religious extremists who regarded them as 'devil worshippers'. A Yezidi council member for the Nineveh Plains was assassinated in April 2006, one of 11 Yezidis reported murdered between September 2005 and September 2006. In April 2007, suspected Sunni militants—thought to be Al Qaeda in Iraq—pulled 23 Yezidi men from a bus and executed them. The same group of extremists targeted the Yezidi community with the single most devastating terrorist attack of the Iraq war in August 2007; four truck bombs killed 215 Yezidis in two villages in the Nineveh Plains, along the Syrian border. A July 2008 report from Iraq's Ministry of Human Rights stated that between 2003 and the end of 2007, a total of 335 Yezidis had been killed in direct or indirect attacks. Although there was a general reduction of violence in Iraq during 2008, attacks against Yezidis continued, including the shooting deaths of seven family members by armed militants in December 2008. At the end of the year, a car bomb in the predominantly Yezidi town of Sinjar, just outside Mosul, killed several people and wounded more than 40 others.