ETHNIC RELATIONS AND POPULATION MIGRATION

YEZIDI KURDS IN GEORGIA: ETHNIC SELF-AWARENESS AND CONSOLIDATION

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The political developments in the Middle East during the 1990s added a global dimension to the Kurdish question, which is having an appreciable effect on the ethnic self-awareness of the Kurds living in Georgia, the absolute majority of whom are Yezidis.

Migration of Kurds in the Southern Caucasus

The first tribes of Yezidi Kurds came to Georgia in the 18th century; in 1918, they migrated in great numbers from the Ottoman Empire, after being driven away (like the Armenians) by the religious persecution, in which the Muslim Kurds also took part.[1]

Under Soviet power, most of the Kurds in Georgia moved to Tbilisi, while a smaller number of them settled in other cities (Rustavi, Batumi, and Telavi). According to the 1959 official figures, there were 16,200 Kurds in this Union republic (0.4 percent of its population); in 1970, there were 20,700, or 0.5 percent; and in 1979, 25,700, or 0.5 percent.[2] According to the last Soviet population census of 1989, there were 33,300 Kurds living in Georgia (0.6 percent). Today, according to the first population

[1] About the Kurdish migrations in the Southern Caucasus (Georgia included), see: D. Pirbari, "Kurdy na Iuzhnom Kavkaze," *Vostok i Kavkaz* (Tbilisi), No. 2, 2002; Pir Dima, "Ezidy na Iuzhnom Kavkaze," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 1, February 2003.

[2] See: V. Djaoshvili, *Population of Georgia in the 18th-20th Centuries,* Tbilisi, 1984, p. 213 (in Georgian).

census conducted by independent Georgia in 2002, there are 20,843 Kurds (19,200 of them live in Tbilisi), or 0.4 percent of its population.[3]

In the 1990s, emigration due mainly to social and economic hardships and mounting nationalism caused their number in the Southern Caucasus and Georgia to drop. The Kurds preferred to settle permanently in Russia and West European countries with strong diasporas. This movement is still going on today; if the Kurds continue to leave at the same rate, their number in the Southern Caucasus will drop even more.

Religion of the Yezidi Kurds in Georgia

The wave of nationalist sentiments in the post-Soviet countries and the mounting fear of being assimilated by the titular nations forced the ethnic minorities of the former Soviet republics to concentrate on saving their ethnic identities. As distinct from other ethnic minorities of Georgia, the Kurdish community demonstrated special processes promoted by the accelerating Kurdish movement in the Middle East (especially in the north of Iraq) and globalization of the Kurdish question.

I have already mentioned that most of the Kurds in Georgia (and in Armenia) are Yezidis.[4] Today, the Yezidi Kurds are one of the rare peoples whose religion plays an ethnically forming role. Today, the Yezidi Kurds, who are descendants of the ancient population of Upper Mesopotamia, are part of a multimillion ethnos in which Muslims predominate. The number of Yezidi Kurds is relatively small—there are about 1 million of them. They live mainly in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Georgia, and Armenia; the recent migration processes brought them to Russia, Ukraine, and Western Europe.

Initially, the Yezidis worshipped Water, Fire, Air, and the Celestial Bodies. The ancient cornerstones of this religion, the Sun, Moon, and Fire, were laid in Sumerian and Babylonian times; their traces can be discerned in the contemporary religion of the Yezidis. Later, after passing through several development stages, their religion became a monotheist faith, the followers of which believed in one single God.[5]

As a result of political, economic, and other perturbations, the Yezidi religion became confined within itself. But this did not prevent it from being passed on from generation to generation and from surviving endless repressions, since its followers were able to zealously defend it. They lived amid constant inroads and under relentless oppression. These factors affected their educational level. They were unable to accept education from the Muslim religious leaders. Because of this faithfully observed tradition, most South Caucasian Kurds remained illiterate until the beginning of the 20th century.[6]

As distinct from the Muslim Kurds, the Yezidic society was organized according to the theocratic-caste principle: it was divided into two castes—the laity and the clergy—each of them closed and unattainable. Members of one caste could not transfer to another and inter-caste marriages were banned.[7]

Today, the Kurdish religious leaders discern the main threat to their ethnic specificity, in which religion plays the main role, in the trends that have been unfolding since the 1990s. Some of the Yezidi Kurds have already become Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and Krishnaists.[8] The religious leaders are convinced that this is because they have no deep knowledge of the faith of their ancestors. Frequently, however, religion changes unconsciously, either for material reasons, or under the influence of active proselytism by apologists of other confessions, or because the Yezidi clergy

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[3] See: *The State Department of Statistics of Georgia. Results of the First National General Population Census of Georgia,* Vol. I, Tbilisi, 2003, p. 100 (in Georgian).

[4] The Muslim Kurds were deported from Georgia to Central Asia in 1944 as one of the unreliable Muslim population groups living along the Turkish border; in this way Georgia lost nearly all its Kurds. (In the 1880s, there were about 3,000 Muslim Kurds in the Tbilisi Gubernia and about 1,000 in Ajaria.)

[5] See: Pir Dima, *Na puti k istine. Ezidizm,* Tbilisi, 2003, p. 4.

[6] The problem of literacy was resolved, to a certain extent, in the Soviet Union, yet some Yezidi Kurds remained illiterate. For more detail, see: D. Pirbari, "Ezidskoe pis'mo," *Etnologicheskiy sbornik Kavkaza,* Tbilisi, No. VIII, 2003, pp. 199-202.

[7] About the religion and traditions, see: A. Amoev, *The Holy Yezidic Books,* Tbilisi, 1999 (in Georgian); A. Menteshashvili, *The Kurds and Kurdistan,* Tbilisi, 1977, pp. 44-48 (in Georgian); L. Pashaeva, "Pogrebal'nye traditsii Kurdov," *Etnologicheskiy sbornik Kavkaza,* No. VIII, 2003, pp. 191-198.

[8] See: Sheikh T. Bavki, "I slovom, i delom," *Kaniya Sipî,* No. 5, August 2003.

are too passive. Indeed, most Yezidi Kurds know next to nothing about their religion.[9] The Yezidi religious leaders think that the religious holydays have lost their true meaning and become a mere formality. This creates the threat of assimilation; in secondary schools, moreover, Christianity is essentially the only religion offered to the pupils. This greatly affects what the children of parents with different religious backgrounds know about the world.[10] It should be said that proselytism does not feature in religion of the Yezidi Kurds.[11] This explains why for many centuries the number of followers of this religion grew at a slow pace.

The religious leaders are convinced that building a Yezidic temple might have helped to preserve ethic specificity and the faith itself.[12] Because of financial problems and contradictions among the Georgian Kurdish organizations, a temple has not yet been built. The main barrier, however, is the current agreement between the Georgian state and the Christian Orthodox Church, under which the Patriarchate must give its consent to building temples of a different confession. In the case of the Yezidi religion, the Patriarchate objected to this.

Religion as a Factor of Ethnic Self-Awareness

As a result of historical processes, the term "Yezidi" came to denote a sub-ethnos within the larger Kurdish ethnos. The Yezidi Kurds recall the massive religious persecutions in the Ottoman Empire, in which Muslim Kurds took an active part. The Yezidi community had to seek shelter in the Russian Empire, on the territory of Armenia and Georgia. The fact that Muslim Kurds were involved in the religious repressions drove the two sides of one ethnos apart. The Yezidis gradually acquired an ethnic self-awareness of their own: the religion of their ancestors played an important role in the process. As a result, this particular ethnic group acquired the term "Yezidi" as part of its ethnic name. (The academic community throughout the world is divided on this issue; here I have limited myself to the trends typical of the Southern Caucasus.)

In Soviet times, the division into Muslim and Yezidi Kurds was caused by political expediency; the Soviet political leaders were guided by the foreign and domestic situation. Not until the late 1980s did the mounting ethnic tension cause ethnic conflicts. The Kurds of Azerbaijan and Armenia were affected by the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, into which they were directly or indirectly drawn. Baku exploited the religious factor to draw the Muslim Kurds onto its side; Erevan used the same tactics to enlist support of the local Yezidi Kurds. As a result, the Muslims and Yezidis found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict. This gave rise to the so-called Yezidi Question in Armenia: supported by all kinds of nationalist groups, certain religious circles tried to present the Yezidis as a separate ethnic group which had nothing to do with the Kurds in general.[13] Indeed, 52,700 Kurds out of the total 60,000-strong Kurdish population in Armenia were identified as Yezidis for the first time during the last Soviet population census of 1989. Some people believe that it was the war in Nagorny Karabakh that added urgency to the issue. Those who defend the Yezidi religion say that the Muslim Kurds have been oppressing the Yezidis, therefore, despite their common tongue, the Yezidi Kurds, as a separate nation, came to acquire a national identity of their own. They allege that this started the Yezidic movement in Armenia.[14] On the other hand, there are forces in Armenia which insist that the Yezidic religious and cultural traditions are deeply rooted in the Kurdish culture and that nearly all the Yezidic holy books were written in the Kurdish language.[15] These ideas, however, failed to gain wide public support.

[9] See: L. Safarova, "Interview so sviashchenosluzhitelem Pire Omar Khali," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 7, August 2003.
[10] See: D. Pirbari, "Ostanemsia samimi soboy," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 5, June 2003.
[11] According to a Yezidi saying one cannot become a Yezidi, one must be born a Yezidi.
[12] See: L. Safarova, "Drevo zhelaniy," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 5, June 2003.
[13] See: Ashiri, "Sodruzhestvo Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv, sud'by i nadezhdy," *Azia i Afrika segodnia,* No. 2, 1998, p. 35.
[14] See: O. Krikorian, "Being Yezidi," *Transitions Online,* 11 November, 2004.
[15] The Kurds of Georgia and Armenia are using the northeastern dialect of the Kurdish tongue.

This division was officially registered in the data of the population censuses carried out in Georgia and Armenia, which means that the two countries independently divided the Yezidis and the Kurds into two ethnic groups. (The 1939 population census in Georgia treated them as one group.) This was done at the request of the Center of Yezidic Traditions Razibun. Those who claimed themselves to be Yezidis were registered as such (18,329 people), while those who called themselves Kurds were registered as Kurds (2,514 people).[16] The same can be said about Armenia: according to the latest population census, there are 40,620 Yezidis, or 1.3 percent of the total population, in the republic, and 1,519 Kurds (or 0.1 percent).[17] Obviously, there is uncertainty among the Yezidi Kurds, as well as in Georgian[18] and Armenian societies, about their ethnic affiliation.

The Yezidis' national self-awareness was further promoted by the military campaign against the Saddam regime in Iraq which unfolded in the 1990s. The war boosted Kurdish nationalism in the north of Iraq, which is populated by the multi-million Kurdish diaspora; its echo reached the Southern Caucasus. Significantly, the Kurdish political leaders make regular public statements to the effect that the Yezidi Kurds are members of the larger Kurdish nation, from which they differ by their religion alone.[19] This is done to preserve the unity of the Kurds scattered across many countries. Since the 1990s the Yezidi Kurds have been calling themselves Kurds more often than before, which can be explained by the rising wave of Kurdish nationalism. It seems that in Georgia the Kurdish organizations and public figures have reached a consensus and selected a neutral term "Yezidi Kurds." The issue has not been finally settled yet. This is confirmed by the Kurdish organizations in Georgia, which cannot agree on a single name for the local Kurds.[20]

The Kurdish Organizations

The first Kurdish organization Ronai[21] appeared in Georgia in Soviet times, in 1988. Later it was renamed the Society of the Kurdish Citizens of Georgia; after its second registration in 1998 it became known as the Union of Yezidis of Georgia. With the financial help of the German embassy the union bought an office building.[22] Since then, the number of similar organizations has increased, while the level of their consolidation is low. They are more concerned with their image of the only defender of the diaspora's interests. Their squabbles do not allow them to effectively defend the rights of the Kurds and to build a Yezidi temple in Tbilisi.

The Kurdish Information-Cultural Center founded in 1991 as the Georgian Branch of the Kurdish Liberation Front is especially radical. Many experts tend to associate it with the leader of the Kurdish Worker's Party (Kongra-Gel), Abdullah Ocalan, whom Turkey declared terrorist No. 1. The Center is still openly and actively promoting Ocalan's ideas in the diaspora; it regularly organizes cultural events and offers language training. At the same time, its other activities attract the attention of the law enforcement bodies. According to its employees, on 20 March, 1999 armed policemen and members of the Georgian security service entered their office where, without sanctions, they detained six Kurds and later more people staying with Kurdish families. It turned out that out of the 13 detained, seven

[16] See: *The State Department for Statistics of Georgia…,* p. 110.

[17] See: M. Toumajan, "Armenian Census Results," *Armenian News Network/Groong,* 27 February, 2004.

[18] The conference organized several years ago in Tbilisi with the help of the Council of Europe was very illustrative in this respect: it was attended by two representatives of the Kurdish diaspora, one of them representing the Kurds, and the other, the Yezidis.

[19] It is interesting to note what Masoud Barzani, one of the popular Kurdish leaders, has to say on this score: "If the Yezidis are not Kurds, then there are no Kurds at all" (see: *Kaniya Sipî,* No. 5, August 2003).

[20] For example, there are the Information-Cultural Center of the Kurds, the Union of Yezidis of Georgia, and the National Congress of the Yezidi Kurds in Georgia in this country. The same can be said about Armenia. For more detail, see: M. Djafarov, "Interview s glavnym redaktorom gazety *Ria taza* Amarike Sardar," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 3, April 2003.

[21] See: L. Berdzenishvili, "Interview s prezidentom kurdskoy assotsiatsii 'Ronai' Iuriem Nabievym," *Svobodnaia Gruzia,* No. 169 (369), 12 December, 1992.

[22] See: *Mnogonatsional'naia Gruzia,* No. 4 (20), August 2002.

were citizens of Armenia, who were forced to sign a promise to promptly leave Georgia. The others turned out to be citizens of Turkey and they were deported back home. This prompted the National-Liberation Front of Kurdistan of the CIS and Western Europe to make a statement that, in so doing, official Tbilisi was courting Ankara. The diaspora is convinced that the detained were exchanged for Georgian children detained in Turkey in August 1998 on the charge of murdering a Turkish child in a summer camp.[23] Three out of the six suspects were released in December of the same year, while the court recognized the innocence of the rest eight months later, that is, immediately after the detained Kurds had been extradited to Turkey.[24]

In 2003, the Center organized several actions in Tbilisi in support of Ocalan. On 20 August, the diaspora marked the 25th anniversary of the Kurdish uprising headed by the Kurdish Worker's Party.[25] When the health of imprisoned Ocalan deteriorated, the Center started a three-day hunger strike in support of the solidarity actions of all Kurdish diasporas all over the world.[26] On 25 January, 2004, the Center's representatives attended the inauguration of Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili holding state flags of Georgia and Kurdistan and accompanied by children dressed in national costumes. The slogan said: "The Kurds of Georgia Support Mikhail Saakashvili."

The Center of Kurdish Culture set up in 1992 is also very active. Its leaders organize regular political actions and demonstrate their anti-Turkish sentiments. On 2 March, 1999, in particular, they carried out a rally in Tbilisi to protest against Ocalan's imprisonment. The few participants shouted anti-Turkish, anti-American, and anti-NATO slogans.[27] On 8 October, 2002 the Center's members held a rally in Tbilisi to protest against military cooperation with Ankara and set fire to Turkey's state flag in public. The Center is convinced that as soon as Georgia joins NATO, Turkey will station its military bases in Georgia. This will start anti-Kurdish repressions; and the Kurds, in turn, will refuse to serve in the Georgian army, which is currently switching to the Turkish model.[28] The desecration of the Turkish state flag prompted Ankara to send a note of protest to Tbilisi, in which it demanded that Georgia make a proper response to this act. Tbilisi responded immediately: the Center's head was summoned for an explanation and was released only after he presented an explanatory note.[29]

There is also the Union of Young Yezidis of Georgia, the Kurdish Yezidi National Congress,[30] the Georgi Shamoev International Foundation of Rights Protection and Religious-Cultural Kurdish Heritage, the Independent League of the Kurdish Yezidi Women of Georgia,[31] and other organizations functioning in Georgia. They all function on their enthusiasm and irregular private donations.

The Kurdish Organizations— Political Discrepancies

The discrepancies among these organizations prevent them from pooling their efforts and working more efficiently, and are even causing political dissent in the diaspora.

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[23] See: T. Rusitashvili, "Ocalan's Supporters are Threatening Georgia with Terrorist Acts. Has Georgia Handed Over the 'Kurdish Patriots' to Turkey?" *Alia,* No. 52 (646), 3-4 April, 1999, in Georgian.

[24] See: A. Mirotadze, "Georgian Children Detained in Turkey are Set Free," *Akhali Taoba,* No. 80 (1208), 24 March, 1999 (in Georgian).

[25] See: *Novy vzgliad,* No. 7, August 2003.

[26] See: V. Nabiev, "Aktsia protesta v Kurdskom mezhdunarodnom kul'turnom tsentre," *Kaniya Sipî,* No. 6, September 2003.

[27] See: M. Lebanidze, "Labor and Komsomol Joined the Kurds' Action," *Rezonansi,* No. 57 (1464), 3 March, 1999 (in Georgian).

[28] See: *Prime News,* 9 October, 2002 (in Georgian).

[29] See: R. Machaidze, "The Kurdish-Turkish War in Georgia," *Rezonansi,* No. 277 (2762), 11 October, 2002 (in Georgian).

[30] See: M. Karamanova, "Yezidskaia molodezh: realii i perspektivy," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 1, February 2003.

[31] See: A. Kazazian, "V Tbilisi sozdana organizatsia kurdskikh zhenshchin Gruzii," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 8-9, September-October 2003.

So far, during the entire period of Georgia's independence, only one Kurdish deputy has been elected to parliament (of the 1995-1999 convocation). This happened in the following way. In 1995, the Citizens' Union of Georgia headed by President Shevardnadze offered the diaspora one place (the 35th) on its election list. The Kurdish organizations took too much time to agree on their candidate and finally had to be satisfied with 78th place for Mame Raiki, a candidate nominated by the Society of the Kurdish Citizens of Georgia (now the Union of the Yezidis of Georgia). The chances for 78th candidate were slim, yet the landslide victory of the Citizens' Union of Georgia made Mame Raiki the first Kurdish deputy in the highest representative body of power. During his deputy term, the parliament allocated 50,000 laris ($25,000) for developing the Kurdish culture. In 1999, the Kurdish organizations failed to agree on a single candidate; Mame Raiki believes that this cannot be achieved until the diaspora becomes consolidated.[32]

The same problem revealed itself at the parliamentary elections of 2 November, 2003: Kurdish candidates represented three absolutely different political parties, while their places on the lists gave no hope for success. Some of the Kurdish public organizations supported President Shevardnadze and its election bloc, For New Georgia (in exchange they placed their candidate, Isko Daseni, on its party list). Others brought together several Kurdish structures to set up the Coordinating Council of the Yezidi Kurds of Georgia (presented on 26 September, 2003), which supported the government bloc.[33] With the help of the government, it began publishing the *Media* journal.[34] Registered as No. 81 on the party list, Isko Daseni had practically no chance of being elected.

The Union of Yezidis of Georgia supported the Union of Democratic Revival of Georgia, the ruling party of the autonomous republic of Ajaria, and the Union of Yezidis nominated its leader, Rostom Atashev,[35] as its parliamentary candidate. Even though the leaders of the Union of Democratic Revival insisted that Atashev would be elected,[36] his 64th place on the election lists gave him practically no hope.

The National Congress of the Yezidi Kurds selected the opposition New Right political party, which paid for its *Novy vzgliad* newpaper, as its election partner.[37] Congress Chairman Aghit Mirzoev, who was convinced that Daseni's and Atashev's chances were slim, held 30th place on the New Right's list[38] and did not get into parliament either.

Even falsification of the results of the parliamentary election of 2 November, 2003 organized by the authorities at that time failed to get the three Kurdish candidates who ran with the pro-governmental parties into parliament. The popular unrest which began several days later ended in the "velvet revolution." President Shevardnadze resigned; pre-term presidential elections were held according to the law, which were followed by pre-term parliamentary elections (28 March, 2004). The Kurds had no candidates on any of the lists of the potentially successful blocs or parties, therefore there are no Kurds in the new parliament.

Conclusion

The repressions carried out by the Muslim Kurds against the Yezidi Kurds were responsible, in part, for the emergence of a sub-ethnic group of Yezidis in the larger Kurdish ethnos. The lively debates currently being held on this issue among the intelligentsia and public organizations of the Kurdish diaspora have confirmed that the Yezidi Kurds are acquiring their own ethnic self-awareness, which is being further boosted by the mounting Kurdish nationalism that took place in the 1990s. While in the past they did not hesitate to call themselves Yezidis, today there are people among them who call themselves Kurds

[32] See: M. Karamanova, "Mame Raiki: 'Ia podderzhu edinogo kandidata'," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 3, April 2003.
[33] See: M. Metreveli, "One 'Nut' for all Kurds," *24 saati,* No. 139 (351), 23 May, 2003 (in Georgian).
[34] See: *Novy vzgliad,* No. 7, August 2003.
[35] See: M. Djafarov, "Konferentsia Soiuza ezidov Gruzii," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 5, June 2003.
[36] See: V. Nabiev, "V Gruzii sozdan Sovet stareyshin kurdov-ezidov," *Kaniya-Sipî,* No. 4, July 2003.
[37] See: *Novy vzgliad,* No. 1, February 2003.
[38] On the debates between the Kurdish candidates and their opinions about the parliamentary elections of 2 November, 2003 see: M. Djafarov, "Krugly stol 'Kurdskoe naselenie v preddverii vyborov: vasha pozitsia," *Novy vzgliad,* No. 8-9, September-October 2003.

who profess the Yezidi faith and who identify themselves with the larger Kurdish ethnic group. The diaspora has agreed that the Yezidi faithful should have the neutral name of Yezidi Kurds, which also describes their ethnic and confessional affiliation. We can say, however, that the process of ethnic self-identification among them is still in flux.