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The Yezidis of Iraq: an Endangered Minority

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Tuesday evening, August 14, 2007 marked the latest turn in Iraq's ongoing nightmare, when a chain of blasts hit the heretofore tranquil and isolated Yezidi Kurdish villages of Gir Uzeir and Siba Sheikh Khidir in the Jebel Sinjar area, near the Iraqi-Syrian border. Four truck bombs destroyed a large portion of the houses of these villages, killing 500 of their inhabitants and leaving many others severely wounded. The attacks marked a low point in the historically delicate relations between the Yezidi minority and its Arab and Kurdish surroundings, raising the question whether or not this small, oft-persecuted community could even continue to exist in Iraq.

Believers in an ancient, heterodoxical Near Eastern

religion that claims to predate Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the majority of Yezidis inhabit the mountainous Kurdish regions of Northern Iraq. Large Yezidi communities also exist in Syria, Armenia and Germany; the latter hosts a bustling and socially aware community of roughly 50,000 Yezidi refugees from Turkey and Iraq. The number of Yezidis residing in Iraqi Kurdistan is estimated at 300,000 residents, divided into two secluded enclaves: the first, in Jebel Sinjar, 150 km. from Mosul, adjacent to the Syrian border; and the second, in the Shaikhan region, 50 km. northeast of Mosul, and home to the holiest Yezidi shrine the sanctuary of Sheikh `Adi, the renovator of the Yezidi religion, in Lalish. It is noteworthy that while Shaikhan has been an integral part of the Kurdish autonomous region since 1991, Sinjar has always officially fallen under the authority of Iraq's central government. Although the Yezidis of Sinjar identify themselves as Kurds and take an active part in the activities of the Kurdish national movement and in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the formal attachment of the Sinjar area to the Kurdish autonomous region is not yet within reach.

The Yezidi religion includes a belief in a single God, Allah, as well as the belief in an archangel that refused to obey the godly command to bow down to Adam. This myth has resulted in Muslims comparing the archangel to *Iblis*, the Qur'anic Satan. Unlike Muslims, the Yezidis believe that their archangel, symbolized by a peacock named *Melek Tawus* (the Peacock Angel), is the source of all goodness and beauty in the world. It is this allegedly satanic religion, combined with cultural and religious seclusion, that led to continuous persecutions of

the Yezidis by Muslims. Throughout the Ottoman period, and particularly during the 19th century, anti-Yezidi persecutions and military campaigns designed to Islamize Yezidi populations in the Kurdish mountains were periodically carried out.

Following the establishment of British-mandated Iraq at the beginning of the 1920's and the establishment of the independent Iraqi state in 1932, Yezidis enjoyed a period of almost fifty years of freedom of religion and relative tolerance. In the 1970's, the wheel was turned back by the Ba`th regime of Saddam Hussein, and Yezidis were subjected to continuous campaigns of Arabization and forced alteration of their identity. The creation of the Kurdish autonomous region in 1991 under the American umbrella gave the Yezidis an aperture of hope, but the persecution and Arabization campaigns continued, particularly in the Sinjar region, which had been left out of the Kurdish autonomous region.

The 2003 American invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam has been a double-edged sword for the Yezidis. On the one hand, they have never hidden their support for the American presence in Iraq, which provided them with some protection from religious-based persecution. On the other hand, it was the American presence that catalyzed the entrance into Iraq of al-Qa`ida, the organization that acts under the banner of Jihad against the infidels, *al-kuffar*. For al-Qa`ida activists, the Yezidis are the worst sort of infidels, as they are not only non-Muslims but devil worshippers as well. The organization has published several proclamations calling for the killing of infidel Yezidis and has taken responsibility for

a number of such acts. The first major incident of this kind was Black Sunday (*al-Ahad al-Aswad*) in April 2007: in reaction to the stoning to death of a 17 year-old Yezidi girl who had announced her wish to convert to Islam in order to marry a Muslim, the most abominable sin possible in Yezidi doctrine, al-Qa`ida activists killed 23 Yezidis on their way to work, near Mosul. Yezidi publicists were quick to warn that "Black Sunday" was merely the beginning of further radical Islamist attacks against Yezidis. The August 14 blasts proved their pessimistic assessments correct: they constituted not only the largest terrorist attack since the 2003 invasion, but also since the September 11 bombings in the US.

For their part, the Yezidis suffer from a political and social schism between those who see themselves as a natural part of the Kurdish people and culture, and hence the Kurdish national movement, and those calling for cultural segregation, owing to their distinct religion. The inability to create a united Yezidi front, along with the fact that the Yezidi villagers in Sinjar do not receive the protection of the *Peshmerga*, the Kurdish army, and that the enhancement of American protection of the large Iraqi cities have made it more difficult for al-Qa`ida to carry out large-scale attacks there, have all contributed to making the defenseless Yezidis a relatively easy target for terrorists. These reasons are complemented by the religious facet, al-Qa`ida's proclaimed war against infidels that provides the legal seal for attacking the Yezidis.

Battered and bruised from the brutal bombings, a big question mark hangs over the Yezidi community's

existence as a religious minority in Iraq. Its options are limited: either remaining divided, and thus risking a state of disintegration and/or forced exile or, alternatively, uniting behind the demand to have all Yezidi areas annexed to the autonomous Kurdish region and working to persuade the KRG to act in that direction. With the priorities of the KRG focused on more pressing matters, particularly control of oil-rich Kirkuk, attaining its sustained backing will not be a simple matter. If the Yezidis do succeed in both putting aside their traditional divisions and winning the KRG's support, the current crisis might turn out to have been a blessing in disguise.

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