

# DISCRIMINATION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN ARMENIA ON THE EXAMPLE OF YEZIDI KURDS

After a forceful deportation of the Azerbaijanis who made up the indigenous population of Armenia in 1988-1989, the present-day Armenia actually represents a mono-ethnic state. The reason for this is no secret: the country lacks the necessary legal conditions for a normal existence of ethnic minorities. The published report of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of Ethnic Minorities of the Council of Europe notes that the majority of the population and the Armenian authorities share the opinion on the mono-ethnicity of this country. The situation in the country does not favor the development of cultures and languages of ethnic minorities. The problems of ethnic minorities are further exacerbated by the lack of attention from most media outlets. The concept of “one nation, one religion, one culture” proclaimed by some Armenian media outlets is aimed at religious minorities, which are perceived as sects that undermine Armenian statehood. In general, ethnic minorities in Armenia are discriminated against in various spheres of life. As a result of the migration outflow, their number is steadily declining.

One of the biggest ethnic minorities of Armenia is the Yezidi Kurds. The Yezidis are a people who speak the Kurdish Kurmanji dialect and practice Yezidism, a religion that arose on the basis of Zoroastrianism. The bulk of the

Yezidis of this country is settled in the marzes (regions) of Aragatsotn, Gegharkunik, Armavir, Ararat and Kotayk. The Yezidi population is also present in the regions of Shirak and Lori. At the time of gaining independence, there were about 60,000 Yezidi Kurds living in Armenia. Today, there is effectively no reliable statistics on the number of Yezidis in Armenia. On 13 February 2017, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of Ethnic Minorities of the Council of Europe published its fourth report on the situation in Armenia. The report states that difficulties encountered during the 2011 census, including inaccurate data collection, lack of transparency and the fact that the results were only published in December 2013, cast doubt on the reliability of the final results published, according to which the number of Yezidi Kurds is 35,272 people. Along with this, it is noted that representatives of ethnic minorities expressed doubt about the reliability of the data collected. In particular, a number of representatives of ethnic minorities indicated that they never saw the census interviewer.

Even though Yezidi Kurds living in Armenia officially make up 3 percent of the population, they did not have a parliamentary representation until 2017. Having adopted the slogan “Armenia is for the Armenians”, the authorities did not allow representatives of ethnic mi-

*Yezidi Kurds. Drawing by M. Tilke. 1830s*

norities to participate in the political life of the country. After the parliamentary elections on 2 April 2012, leaders of the Yezidi community expressed dissatisfaction with the results and, in line with the motto "Yezidis are only appreciated by the Yezidis", put forward a demand that only the Yezidis themselves should deal with their problems. As is known, the parliamentary elections of 2017 were held according to the new system due to the changes in the country's constitution whereby Armenia became a parliamentary republic. The changes also affected the representation of ethnic minorities in parliament: special quotas were allocated to three communities - Assyrians, Yezidis and Kurds. Thus, the Yezidis are set apart from the rest of the Kurds. Knyaz Hamid was the only candidate from the Kurdish community to end up in parliament and Rustam Makhmudyan from the Yezidis, although the Yezidis wanted to be represented in parliament by at least four deputies.

After the failed attempt to populate the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan with Syrian

Armenians, the Armenian authorities decided to take advantage of the situation with Iraq's Yezidi Kurds, as some of their compact settlements had been captured by ISIS terrorists. In 2014, the "NKR" press secretary, David Babayan, said that the separatist regime he represented was ready to provide asylum to Iraqi Yezidis. The occupied Lachin district of Azerbaijan was chosen as the place of their settlement. This was a far-reaching plan: firstly, Lachin district has tremendous strategic importance, and secondly, if the war resumed, the Yezidi Kurds could easily become a target and serve as a convenient shield for anti-Azerbaijani propaganda. However, after the demarche by David Babayan, the statement of the Iraqi Embassy in Azerbaijan followed: "We recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, which is reflected in UN resolutions on this issue. According to international law, we must respect the territorial integrity of other states. Any visit to Azerbaijan without official permission Baku is illegal. We urge our citizens, including the Yezidi Kurds, to stay away from both the conflict itself and the conflict zone."



*The Yezidi Kurds of Armenia. Due to the policy of the authorities, they are the most socially and economically backward part of the country's population.*

As already noted, representatives of ethnic minorities are leaving Armenia. The report of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of Ethnic Minorities of the Council of Europe states that the largest reduction in numbers is observed among the Yezidis - from 40.620 in 2001 to 35.308 in 2011. It is noted that the authorities attribute this process to a difficult economic situation affecting the entire population of the country, including ethnic minorities. In addition, the Yezidi Kurds are settled mainly in remote mountainous areas, which are characterized by the lowest standard of living. The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict caused by the military aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan and economic difficulties strongly affect the socioeconomic situation in the country, limiting the possibilities for implementing projects that would benefit ethnic minorities. The lack of teaching staff in schools due to the low standard of living in places of resettlement of ethnic minorities, together with the prevailing custom of early marriages, especially among Yezidi Kurds, minimizes the chances of children to complete the mandatory 12-year secondary education cycle. In this regard, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of Ethnic Minorities of the Council of Europe notes the absence of specific legislation on the prohibition of forced marriages and calls on the authorities to review the legislation in accordance with international human rights standards. Armenian authorities take a rather passive approach to cultural projects regarding ethnic minorities and do not provide them with organizational or human resources. In this regard, the Advisory Committee notes that over the past five years, the legislative framework

and government policy regarding the support for the cultural activities of ethnic minorities has not changed.

The Yezidi Kurds living in Armenia also face religious problems. The fact is that ever since becoming independent, the country has been conducting a targeted Christianization campaign. As a result, a third of all Yezidi Kurds in Armenia is Christian. The Ministry of Education of Armenia has done a good deal of work on the Christianization of the Yezidis. For more than 16 years, the history of the Armenian church has been taught in Armenian schools. These classes do not teach history as much as they serve as an instrument to introduce children to Gregorian Christianity, especially since this subject is obligatory for everyone regardless of religion. According to human rights activist Stepan Danielyan, their organization has conducted a study and found that classes on this subject violate human rights. "We have examined to what extent these lessons are consistent with the laws of Armenia. We wanted to find out if these classes were secular. Many teachers and officials of the Ministry of Education did not even imagine how these lessons violate human rights. In schools with non-Christian children, educational conversations are conducted and pressure is put on kids. Children not reading Armenian prayers are kicked out of classes. These classes are supervised by Armenian clergy." In 2011, this issue was raised by the organization "Sinjar". In response, the Armenian Ministry of Education stated that those who oppose the history of the Armenian church actually serve Armenia's enemies. In 2014, representatives of "Sinjar" met with the Minister of Education and raised the question of granting the children of Yezidi Kurds the right not to attend these classes. In response, Minister of Education Armen Ashotyan demanded that this question not be raised again. "I urge conscious citizens to stay away from such issues. Yezidi youth should not interfere in these matters and think only about their education. Do not pour water on the mill of our enemies." Human rights activist Artur Sakunts said: "The purpose of teaching the history of the Armenian church is to subordinate children to the Armenian Apostolic Church. These lessons are not secular and contradict the Armenian constitution. It will be better if the child receives education based on the general rights and dignities of a person, but what we see is that the philosophy of the

*The Yezidi Kurds of Armenia are denied basic living conditions*



Armenian church is the basis of education in Armenian schools. These classes are a means of propaganda of the Armenian religion" [2].

It should be noted that due to socioeconomic problems, some Yezidis are going to adopt Christianity in order to receive food or other assistance. For example, in the village of Amre located north of Yerevan, 33 percent of the population converted to Protestantism only to receive help from western missionaries.

The Advisory Committee for the Framework Convention for the Protection of Ethnic Minorities of the Council of Europe notes that, according to representatives of ethnic minorities, schools pay little attention to the history of ethnic minorities. As a result, many minority children, including Yezidi Kurds and Molokans, are less likely to know the history of their communities than that of Armenia or the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The report of the Advisory Committee also indicates that the history of ethnic minorities as an integral part of society should be taught in all schools in order to raise children's awareness of the ethnic and cultural diversity of their country. In 2015, the web-site of the Ararat diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church "qahana.am" posted an answer to the reader's question: "What

religion do the Yezidis practice and can an Armenian girl marry a Yezidi Kurd?" The answer caused widespread indignation among the Yezidis. Sashik Sultanyan, chairman of the Center for Interethnic and Intercultural Cooperation, quoted priest Yesai Artenian: "Yezidis worship the sun. At the entrance to the shrine of the Yezidis, one can see a monument to Satan. It's not that they believe in Satan, but they ask him not to harm them" [1]. Sashik Sultanyan then urged the priest to apologize to the Yezidis for insulting their religious feelings.

The issue of discrimination against the Yezidis in Armenia has been raised not only on religious grounds. In particular, in June 2009, the Yezidi couple Mejid and Zarifa Gasoyan, their daughter Narine and grandson Tengiz were found dead in their house in the Abovyan region of Armenia, with more than 80 stab wounds and other signs of violence. Reportedly killed by the neighbors, the family was wealthy and at the same time famous for charity and humanism. This incident caused serious concern among the Yezidis all over the world. They recalled that this was not the first case of the massacre of Armenians against the Yezidis. In August 2011, a fight broke out between the Yezidis and Armenians in the village of Zovuni, in which seven Yezidis received



*The Yezidi Kurds of Armenia eke out a miserable existence*

In 2013, Manvel Badeyan, a deputy from the Republican Party, responded to a comment by one of the journalists that the broadcast of the game “What? Where? When?” in the Russian language ran counter to the law “On the language” and added that such a question “could only be asked by a Yezidi from the street, not a media representative”. After this incident, a group of members of the Yezidi Union met with the vice speaker of the Armenian parliament, Eduard Sharmazanov, and stated the Yezidi community’s anger at the deputy’s behavior, demanding that Badeyan apologize to the Yezidis [3]. Along with this, members of the Yezidi organization “Sinjar” staged a protest outside the parliament building. On 1 December, “Sinjar” issued a statement with an apology of Manvel Badeyan to the Yezidis. On 11 December, Badeyan told reporters on the sidelines of the parliament that he did not at all intend to insult the Yezidi community, but only wanted to say that the intelligence level of some journalists is lower than that of the Yezidis cleaning the streets.

various injuries. One of the Armenians put a gun to the forehead of the chairman of the Union of Yezidis of Armenia, Aziz Tamoyan. It should be noted that the latter used to lead a detachment of Yezidi militia named after Jangir-aga, which participated in Armenia’s military aggression against Azerbaijan.

Another case involving an ongoing trial has reverberated quite widely. Employees of the Judicial Acts Compulsory Enforcement Service of the Ministry of



### *The Yezidi Kurds of Armenia demand autonomy*

Justice beat up a Yezidi woman and her son, saying: "Go back to your Yezidi ...", B. Murtazi has told the Armenian site "Aravot" in an article called "I won't bring a Yezidi daughter-in-law to my home". All these facts prove the discrimination against the Yezidis in Armenia. The Advisory Committee encouraged the authorities to continue to engage civil society in the process of developing the anti-discrimination law and adopt it without further delay.

We can reach the following conclusions from the above:

- Discrimination and ousting representatives of ethnic and religious minorities has been raised to the level of state policy in Armenia;

- Official data on the number of Armenia's ethnic minorities based on the results of the census are inaccurate;

- Armenian authorities are pursuing a policy of Christianization of ethnic minorities;

- Ethnic and religious minorities experience problems in the educational, cultural and social spheres.

The report of the Advisory Committee on the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of Ethnic Minorities and other sources show that Armenia does not comply with international legal standards for the protection of human rights and ethnic minorities. ✪



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