

POLICY OF “SECRET DEPORTATION” OF YEZIDI KURDS FROM ARMENIA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Yezidi Kurds. Drawing by M. Tilke. 1830s



The Yezidis, an offshoot of the Kurds, have a Yezidi faith, which is a form of religion based on the customs of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to various estimates, there are about 3 million Yezidi Kurds in the world (1). Although more than a million of them live in northern Iraq, some in Syria, Turkey, Georgia and Armenia, many have already migrated to Europe. Yezidis currently living in Armenia have mostly moved to Russia. (2)

The mass migration of Yezidis from Armenia to Russia was a result of the policy pursued by the government. Thus, the collapse of the USSR was the beginning of a difficult life for the Yezidis. Although the government's post-independence package of reforms (law enforcement, land reform, etc.) was primarily aimed at reviving the country's economy, it also had another goal, which was to target Yezidis, an ethnic minority. During this period, Armenia began to pursue a policy of cleansing the country of ethnic minorities. Acting on the ideology of "only Armenians should live in Armenia", state representatives put this principle in the forefront in every step taken and applied. For this reason, the Yezidis began to be oppressed materially, religiously and legally in the country.

The first step of the "secret deportation" policy.

After the last deportation of Azerbaijanis, the Yezidi Kurds were the largest ethnic minority left in the country. Their number could have a certain impact on the social, economic and political situation in the country. However, Armenia, which openly carried out a deportation process against Azerbaijanis, was reluctant to organize a second open deportation campaign, because the government, which was pursuing a policy of aggression at the same time as declaring its independence, was not ready for a second wave of open deportations. For this reason, the policy pursued was based on the principle of oppression of the Yezidis by various means, and their "secret deportation" was organized. The main goals of this deportation policy were to ensure that ethnic minorities, especially Yezidis, leave the country "voluntarily" through material and moral oppression and discrimination.

The 2008 report of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages states that 7,413 Yezidis live in cities and 33,207 in regions of Armenia (3). From this it can be concluded that the vast majority of Yezidis settled in villages. For this reason, arable land and pastures are the main source of income for the Yezidi Kurds. Yezidis spend the cold months of the year in the countryside, and the remaining months in the mountains keeping

animals. As a result, the land is sacred to the Yezidis. Given the community's agricultural experience and the use of pastures in connection with livestock, we can say that land is important for the survival of the people in the community. That is, the seizure of the Yezidis' lands means the seizure of their livelihoods. Taking this important factor into account, the Armenian government took the first step to reduce the Yezidi ethnic minority in the country through land "reform". As a result of this policy, the Yezidis had to either assimilate or emigrate, abandoning their old traditional way of life.

Under the guise of restoring the country's economy that collapsed in 1990-1991, the decision to implement the "Land Privatization" programme in Armenia was approved. The main goal of the programme was to revive the country's collapsed economy and identify land plots. However, the process of land privatization by the Armenian government posed a serious threat to the survival of the nomadic Yezidi community. The Regional Council of People's Deputies was designated as the body responsible for implementing the Land Reform Law. The council established a special committee composed of representatives of the agricultural community or the agricultural sector. The committee took a number of steps in the process of land allocation. As a first step, usable land was identified. Second, suitable families were identified according to the number of plots, but no families were included except for Armenian families. Third, the share of land per family was calculated. Fourth, the territorial size of the land plots was calculated and divided into different groups in terms of productivity. In the end, the land was distributed to local residents by casting lots. Each landowner who won the casting of lots had to pay for the land. (4) This was the general reform framework defined for the land. The main victims of this reform were the Yezidis.

Thus, the Armenian government, whose main goal was to deport the Yezidis from the country, took all necessary measures to prevent them from getting land plots. The Armenian government claimed that it did not receive application forms for the privatized land plots from the Yezidis. That is, it claimed that the Yezidis did not apply to get land. However, according to Serjik Avetisyan, head of the village of Zovuni, local residents did not know that such a process would take place. He noted, "No one came to the village and talked to us. It is true that there were advertisements in the newspapers, but no one in the village reads newspapers" (5). Later, in 2000, a new law was passed to privatize land by auction. Razmik

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



Davoyan, the president's adviser on national minorities, said that "these lands are not the real lands of the Yezidis and can therefore be put up for auction. However, those who did not submit their applications on time or did not meet the requirements cannot buy land at the auction." (6) Of course, this was not a very promising situation for the Yezidis, who were faced with financial difficulties due to the 1990-1991 Land Privatization Programme. It was impossible for impoverished Yezidis to buy land by auction. That is, the Armenian government was aware that the Yezidis would not be able to acquire land and took steps in this direction. In the end, the Yezidis acquired unused and unusable land in the mountains (7), which meant that the state isolated the Yezidis



Armenia's Yezidi Kurds are denied basic living conditions

from society by sending them to remote areas of the country. This problem was even mentioned in the 2008 report by the United States High Commissioner for Refugees. The report noted that Yezidis in Armenia faced problems with land privatization and land ownership, lack of political representation, and social exclusion. (8) However, this was not an effective document for the Armenian government. The Republic of Armenia also ignored the instructions of international organizations concerning the Yezidis. The Universal Periodic Review presented by the Republic of Armenia in 2010-2014, based on a study by the European Commission

against racism and discrimination, stated that "the Yezidi minority continues to face problems with land, water and pastures, and some members of this community still do not have ownership of their land". At the same time, the report noted that no system has yet been established to ensure greater access for national minorities to the country's civil and political life. (9)

The question is what were the reasons for the state not to give land to the Yezidis in the land privatization programme?

First of all, using this programme, the Republic of Armenia wanted to exclude the country's largest ethnic minority, the Yezidis, from the socio-political and economic life of the country and to strengthen the government's position in the regions by taking land from them. This is because the Yezidis, who had a majority in a number of villages during the USSR, could have dominated the country after the collapse of the USSR in terms of land ownership. This worried the Armenian government. Using this programme, the government, which did not accept the superiority of any other people in the country over the Armenian population, took the land from the Yezidis. These lands were handed over to Armenian farmers and Armenian businessmen in exchange for bribes. In this way, the government was able to take over land plots and change the material turnover in the field of agriculture and livestock in the country in its favour.

Second, the programme was to lay a solid foundation for future Yezidi emigration. Yezidis who had their

lands seized under the Land Privatization Programme were forced to leave the country due to economic difficulties. This was a double-edged sword pursued by the Armenian government. The most obvious example of this is the current situation in the village of Tlik in the Aragatsotn (Alagozdaban) province. Thus, according to 74-year-old Surik Khachatryan, who gave an interview in 2019, there were 7 families living in the village at the time. Before the privatization of land and the destruction of the irrigation system, 110 families lived in the village. However, they migrated to other countries and never returned. (10) In the current situation, the village no longer has drinking water or gas.

Of course, the state must allocate a budget to solve these problems. However, the state does not provide the necessary financial support to Yezidi communities to solve problems. The 2016 report of the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) states that the state provides little financial support to national minorities living in Armenia, and this financial support is not distributed in a balanced way. For example, the Yezidi community of about 40,000 people receives the same amount of money from the state budget as the German community of 40 people. They receive less than 2 million drams (about \$ 4,165) a year, which is too little to solve any problem in a community of about 40,000 people. (11) Of course, these problems have affected not only this village, but also the villages inhabited by many distant Yezidi communities. The residents of that village left their village due to the lack of favourable living conditions, which means that the government partly achieved its goal. Even Aziz Tamoyan, a member of the Yezidi National Union, claims that the land privatization process is politicized and that the goal is to expel the Yezidis from Armenia. (12)

As a result of land privatization, the Yezidis were deprived of the right to own land and use pastures. In the process of land privatization, no Yezidi family was involved in the local self-government of the village, and while the Armenian parts of the villages were supplied with gas and resurfaced, the houses of the Yezidis were not supplied with gas, and the adjacent streets were left in poor condition. The Yezidis living in the village of Zovuni in the Aragatsotn (Alagozdaban) region have repeatedly complained to the authorities that the streets are not paved, that there is water and mud everywhere, and that there is no gas supply. Authorities have been repeatedly asked to help improve the situation, but despite promises to do so, they failed. At the same time,

Yezidi Kurds of Armenia eke out a beggarly existence



their lives are threatened because of problems with power lines in the village. U. Avdalyan, a 75-year-old resident of the village, says, "In 1965, power lines were laid in this village. These power lines are dangerous because they run over houses in the village and are not repaired. When the power lines were laid, they promised to pay the price of our houses and move us out of here. But we are still here." On the eve of the 2003 presidential election, President Robert Kocharyan promised to remove the power lines, but failed to do so. The same promises were given to the villagers before the 2007 parliamentary elections by Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, but like Kocharyan, he did not keep his promise. (13) That is, the Yezidi community, deceived even by the country's presidents, continues to live in danger in the village.

During the Soviet era, the Yezidi community was provided with pastures and land (14), and in rural areas, Yezidis worked at collective farms. The Yezidis living in the settlements worked at least as sweepers. However, in today's Armenia, even this job is not given to them. The Yezidis, deprived of all opportunities to survive, are forced to leave the country. As a result, a Yezidi family either leaves the country altogether or has to send a family member abroad to live on remittances from him.

That is, the policy of land privatization was to show the state's position against the Yezidis. Of course, the fact that the vast majority of Yezidi communities live in remote villages, are unable to build communities, and live in isolation from normal living conditions are among the main factors that increase lawlessness against them.

Yezidi Kurds of Armenia demand an autonomy



Thus, the Armenian government, which uses the Soviet empire’s “divide and rule” policy against ethnic minorities in the country, sees the presence of the largest ethnic minority, the Yezidis, in one place as a threat to the country. For this reason, the Armenian government can easily apply a policy of discrimination against Yezidis living in small communities far from each other.

The second step of the “secret deportation” policy. The second step in the policy of “secret deportation” of Yezidis was carried out by the legislature and law enforcement agencies. The policy of isolating Yezidis from society, which began with the privatization of land, was pursued not only by government officials but also by law enforcement officials. State institutions no longer considered Yezidi complaints. Although complainants requested a comprehensive explanation from the relevant community leader on the issues raised in their complaint and a detailed explanation of each issue raised in the complaint, the investigation into the complaint was suspended for various reasons.

For example, a report published by a Yezidi group based in Germany in 1996 can be pointed out. The report alleged that Yezidi farms were looted and three prominent members of the community were killed, and claimed that the crime was covered up through bribery. (15) However, this investigation remained merely a claim due to lack of evidence. Of course, this was either a cover-up by the state or a gap in the working principles of the law enforcement agencies. However, in 2002, the ICERD (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) expressed its position on this issue. The convention expressed concern about allegations of discrimination against Yezidis by police

and local authorities and the failure of the police to respond to crimes committed by other citizens against this minority. (16) However, this did not cause the Armenian government to change its line. In fact, a similar incident happened again.

On 7 December 2006, Gulizar Avdalyan, a 67-year-old Yezidi woman, came into the public spotlight when she tried to set herself on fire in front of the President’s Office by pouring petrol on herself

and her three grandchildren. She was protesting about the investigation into the murder of his son Kyaram Avdalyan. Gulizar Avdalyan and other Yezidis from her village claimed that her son was beaten to death by a local Armenian village head after a dispute over the use of pastures in the village. However, someone else was arrested for the crime, and the matter was once again covered up. As a result of the incident, Gulizar Avdalyan and her grandchildren were hospitalized with serious injuries. (17)

Another violation occurred in July 2015. Four members of the Judicial Enforcement Service came to the house of Nazik Amaryan, a Yezidi woman, wounded her, and forcibly evicted her and her son Yuri from the house. According to Yuri, one of the perpetrators used insulting words, citing the Yezidi origin of the Amaryan family. Yuri Amaryan was then forcibly taken to a police station without receiving any medical treatment and charged with “using force against an official.” Yuri’s state-appointed lawyer Ludvig Avetisyan said ethnic discrimination exacerbated the situation even more. (18) The cover-up of the killings of Yezidis or the failure to arrest the real criminals was already a source of fear in Yezidi communities.

It can be seen from the above that there is no legal basis for the protection of Yezidi rights in the country. Despite some changes to the law in Armenia in recent years, the legislation still does not provide a clear definition of racial discrimination, directly or indirectly. As a result, racial discrimination is virtually never used as part of a legal procedure. The lack of an appropriate legal framework is the reason why most cases of discrimination are not recognized and, as a result, not documented.

Armenian government sent military police to crush a protest action by Yezidi Kurds

For example, Article 226 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia is entitled “Incitement to national, religious and racial hatred.” According to the first paragraph of the article, those who incite national, racial or religious hatred, commit acts promoting racial superiority or humiliation of national dignity are punishable by a fine, up to 2 years of correctional labour or 2-4 years’ imprisonment. According to Article 2.2, those who abuse their position and discriminate on the basis of nationality, race or religion must be punished. (19)

However, based on the above, we can note that this law is very poorly reflected in the Criminal Code. Thus, first of all, racial discrimination is reflected in only one article of the law. On the other hand, the law does not reflect the moral and psychological limits of racial discrimination, and the opportunities for ethnic minorities to exercise this right are severely limited. Ethnic minorities no longer see the need to complain, as complaints mostly resulted in fines. According to lawyer A. Gazaryan, Article 226 of the Criminal Code is too weak and there is no tradition of opening criminal cases under it. (20) As a result, the Yezidis, unable to protect their rights and living in fear of death, began to leave the country out of fear.

The third step of the “secret deportation” policy.

At this stage, the main goal was to oppress the Yezidis and show disrespect for their religious beliefs and traditions. Yezidis were forced to leave the country not only because of financial but also because of moral difficulties.

In 2008, representatives of national minorities, especially the Yezidi community, filed complaints with government agencies alleging discrimination against them. The incident took place in the Nor-Nork district of Yerevan. As a large building was being built in the area, the Yezidi cemetery was demolished and the area was paved. The cemetery, where about 50 Yezidis were buried, was said to have a century-old history. Yezidis complained about the destruction of their relatives’ graves as a result of construction work. Surik Aloyan, 62, said his parents, sister and son were buried in the Yezidi cemetery, but nothing was left of their graves. Aziz Tamoyan, chairman of the Armenian Yezidi National



Union, said that if the situation is not prevented and the cemetery is not renovated, the Yezidi community will appeal to an international court. Although the complaint was accepted for consideration, the investigation phase was extended and as a result, the complainants were not informed. (21)

Another similar incident occurred in 2014. Seryozha Grigoryan, a close relative of Armenian Republican Party MP Hrant Grigoryan, demolished an old Yezidi cemetery in the village of Myasnikyan in the Armavir (Sardarabad) province. Boris Tamoyan, a spokesman for the Sinjar Yezidi association, told epress.am in an interview that 22 graves had been destroyed in the cemetery to build a winery. According to locals, in the face of their strong protests, Seryozha Grigoryan restored two of the graves, but denied the destruction of the other 20 graves and refused to restore them. (22) The psychological pressure exerted by the government and the clergy, including the people, was already a reason for the Yezidis to remove Armenia from the list of places to live.

The Yezidis are not the first people to face vandalism by Armenians. As we know, there were many historical and architectural monuments, caravanserais, buildings, mosques, cemeteries, mausoleums, tombstones, etc. belonging to Azerbaijan and located in the territory of present-day Armenia, which is the historical Azerbaijani land. These religious and cultural monuments belonging to the Azerbaijani people were destroyed by Armenians, and many of them did not reach modern times.

The consequences of the “secret deportation” policy. If we pay attention to the demographic situation of the Yezidis in the country, we can see the consequences of this “secret deportation” policy of the

state. According to the 1926 census carried by the Soviet government, there were 12,237 Yezidi Kurds in Armenia. This number increased to 26,657 in the 1959 census and 52,700 in 1989. However, as a result of the collapse of the USSR, the economic collapse in the country due to the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the policy of secret deportation of Yezidis, a mass exodus of Yezidi Kurds from the country began. It is estimated that between 6,000 and 10,000 Yezidis emigrated from Armenia after the 1990s. (23) That is why the 2001 census reduced the Yezidi population to 40,620. This decline continued in the 2011 statistics, with the number of Yezidis falling to 35,308.

However, if we pay attention to the latest demographic indicators, we can see that the policy of "secret deportation" pursued by Armenia was not successful. The number of Yezidi ethnic minorities in Armenia has not decreased as desired by the Armenian nationalists. The reason for this was that compared to the Armenians, the growth rate among the Yezidis was very high. (24) Unable to get what they wanted, the authorities began to use the Yezidis as a weapon in addition to the policy of deportation. The Armenian government, which was already accused of discriminating against Yezidis by international organizations, said it will give asylum to Yezidis from Iraq both to create a new international image for itself and use Yezidis as victims in its covert policies.

As it is known, although Armenia receives a large number of refugees of Armenian origin, people of non-Armenian origin have problems obtaining asylum and refugee status. This can be understood by looking at the statistics. None of the 25 Iranian citizens who applied for refugee status in 2014 were able to obtain citizenship. In 2015, 316 people applied for refugee status. Of the 22 applicants from Iran, only three were granted refugee status. Of the nine applicants from Lebanon, only one received this status. In 2016, a total of 37 people were granted refugee status in Armenia, of whom 29 were Armenians from Syria. (25) Looking at these statistics, it is clear that Armenia does not want to see representatives of other nations in its country.

However, in 2014, the so-called "NKR spokesman" David Babayan said that the separatist regime was ready to provide "asylum" to Yezidis from Iraq. (26) Although Armenia's incomprehensible tolerance of the Yezidis was in fact described as "Armenian humanism", there was another purpose behind this move. Thus, the occupied Lachin District of the Republic of Azerbaijan was chosen

as the place of residence for the Yezidis. The choice of Lachin District was not accidental, because this area is of strategic importance. Armenia's goal was to make the Yezidis the main target in the event of a new war with Azerbaijan, thereby strengthening its propaganda policy against Azerbaijan in the world. In other words, the Armenian government did not hesitate to place the Yezidis in danger in order to achieve its goals. This shows that the life of the Yezidi representative in the country is not important.

However, Armenia had a second reason for granting asylum for the Yezidis. Those Yezidis were a guarantee of Russian policy in Armenia. Russia's interests in Iraq and Syria are a known fact. Yezidis coming to Armenia would have the opportunity to promote Russia's interests in Iraq and Syria, because the Yezidis from Iraq and Syria know the region well and could easily carry out the propaganda process through their relatives living there. For this reason, Russia pursued this goal through Armenia. Keeping in mind that Armenia rarely grants citizenship and refugee status to non-Armenians, we can see from a different perspective that this is not humanism but use of an oppressed people by Armenia.

In fact, the study shows that after the collapse of the USSR, the Yezidis fell victim to various Armenian policies. This caused the Yezidi community to either leave the country or continue to live in the country under very difficult conditions.

The conclusion. From the analysis, it can be concluded that Armenia is a mono-ethnic state and the oppression and discrimination of other peoples is the state policy of Armenia. After the declaration of independence, a serious demographic crisis arose in Armenia along with the political and economic crises, and this process intensified day by day. Despite the seizure of Yezidi lands and the increase in the number of Yezidis killed in society as a result of the policy of "secret deportation", no legal proceedings were instituted regarding them and crimes, including religious violence and the destruction of cemeteries were covered up, which caused the Yezidis to leave the country en masse.

However, the results of the "secret deportation" of the Yezidis did not meet the goals of the Armenian government. For this reason, the Armenian government pursued a second policy. The Armenian government, which wanted to change the image of mono-ethnicity under the guise of giving asylum to the Yezidis and use the Yezidis as a weapon, was in fact openly demonstrating its intentions. It is clear from

these processes that Armenia will never give up the concept of “one nation, one religion, one culture”, but will simply change the direction of its policies within this concept. ❁

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