

Armenia: Yezidi Identity Battle

New textbooks highlight division within Armenia's Yezidi community. Yezidis in the western Aragatsotn region of Armenia have taken a dim view of government efforts, supported by the UN children's agency, UNICEF, to bolster minority education in the republic.

At the beginning of September, at an event staged in the Yezidi village of Alagyaz, government officials said that new textbooks in minority languages would be distributed to schools in minority-populated villages, while UNICEF said it would provide stationary and other supplies.

Less than a month later, however, Yezidis in Alagyaz and ten surrounding villages were complaining. Their language is the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, but the books funded and provided by the government were instead written in Ezdiki. While the latter is still Kurdish by another name, the alphabet chosen for publication was in the unaccustomed Cyrillic alphabet instead of the more usual Latin or Arabic scripts.

"All schools have at present is old Soviet-era textbooks," said Gohar Saroava, a young journalist with the Mesopotamia newspaper in Yerevan and one of the few Muslim Kurds remaining in Armenia. Others, however, are more outspoken. "These [new] books are a shame and we don't want to have this rubbish," said Torkom Khudoyan, vice-president of the National Committee of Yezidis of Armenia.

Speaking to IWPR, both UNICEF and Hranush Kharatyan, head of the Armenian government's department for national minorities and religious affairs, confirmed reports that the new textbooks are being rejected, but said that it was outside their remit to intervene. Critics, however, argue that the situation should never have arisen in the first place and allege it is part a continuing attempt to promote a non-Kurdish identity among Armenia's Yezidis.

Yezidis are the largest ethnic minority in Armenia, with most having arrived in the country in the mid 19th and early 20th centuries. Widely dismissed as devil worship, Yezidism in fact combines elements from Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Although the Yezidis are generally considered to be Kurds who resisted pressure to convert to Islam, there have been attempts to identify them as a separate ethnic group in Armenia since the last years of Soviet rule.

In 1988, an appeal was made to the Soviet authorities by some Yezidi leaders requesting that they be designated as an ethnic group. This coincided with the beginning of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorny Karabakh, as a result of which, thousands of Muslim Kurds fled Armenia, alongside ethnic Azerbaijanis. Yezidis, however, were spared.

In 1989, the request was granted, and in the last Soviet census conducted the same year, out of approximately 60,000 Kurds who had been formerly identified as living in Armenia, 52,700 were for the first time given a new official identity as Yezidis. The 2001 census put the number of Yezidis and Kurds in the republic at 40,620 and 1,519 respectively.

Hasan Tamoyan, editor of the Armenian-language Yezidikhana newspaper and head of the Yezidi programme on Armenian Public Radio, eagerly cites the last census as evidence that Yezidis are not Kurds. Tamoyan is also one of the authors of the controversial new school textbooks.

"There are over 40,000 people who identified themselves as Yezidis and only around 1,500 that identified themselves as Kurds," said Tamoyan. "Aren't you inclined to believe the official data? Is Kurmanji listed as a language in the census? The Kurdish language is not even mentioned. There is only the Yezidi language, Ezdiki."

However, few specialists on the Yezidis outside of Armenia agree.

"The Yezidi religious and cultural tradition is deeply rooted in Kurdish culture and almost all Yezidi sacred texts are in Kurdish," said Philip Kreyenbroek, head of Iranian studies at the University of Goettingen in Germany and a leading specialist on the Kurds and the Yezidis of Turkey and northern Iraq.

Dr Christine Allison, a lecturer at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, INALCO, in Paris currently conducting fieldwork among Yezidis in Armenia, agrees. "I have met more Yezidis in Armenia who believe they are also Kurds," she said, "and with the exception of two villages in Iraq, Yezidis speak Kurmanji Kurdish. Their oral and material culture is typical of Kurdistan and pretty much identical to non-Yezidi Kurds."

Nahro Zagros, an ethnic Kurdish PhD student from Iraq studying the ethno-musical traditions of Yezidis at the University of York, concurs. Zagros says that he also stumbled upon what many consider to be the artificial division of the community on a recent visit to Armenia. "The school in Shinkani has refused these textbooks, and teachers from Rya Taze, Alagyaz, Dirik, Orta Chia, Amri Taze and Jamushlow have also rejected them," he said.

The situation in Armenia also differs markedly from that in neighbouring Georgia, home, according to official statistics, to 18,000 Yezidis.

"There are problems in Georgia, but we [Kurds] are one nation," said Pir Dima, a Yezidi religious leader from Tbilisi visiting Armenia in September. "It's just that our religion is different. However, the problem in Georgia is nowhere near as serious as it is in Armenia. Yezidis here [in Armenia] don't want Armenians to know that they are Kurdish because Muslim Kurds killed Armenians as well as Yezidis [during the 1915 genocide]."

Rostom Atashov, president of the Union of Yezidis in Georgia, told IWPR his community uses the Kurmanji dialect and the Latin script. "We are both Yezidis and Kurds," he said. "We have one language and it is Kurdish, and if you look at where the Yezidis came from geographically, it is Kurdistan. In Georgia, we've never even debated this problem. Yezidis are Kurds, and we all believe that."

Atashov also says he believes that the division has opened up Armenia's Yezidi community to the appeal of organisations such as the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party, PKK, currently fighting a separatist guerrilla war in Turkey. "The Armenian government doesn't want to recognise Yezidis as Kurds so the only people willing to help Yezidis in Armenia with establishing their identity are groups such as the PKK," he said.

And that certainly seems to be the case in at least six Yezidi villages in the Aragatsotn and Armavir regions of Armenia visited by IWPR this autumn. While many Yezidis openly identified themselves as such, all also said they were Kurmanji-speaking ethnic Kurds. They additionally expressed support for the PKK and displayed portraits of Abdullah Ocalan, the organisation's imprisoned leader, in their homes, cultural centres and schools.

In recent years, several PKK representatives have also openly visited Armenia to tour Yezidi villages. Last year, Yusuf Avdoyan, a Yezidi from the Armavir region of Armenia, was killed along with six other PKK members fighting in Batman, Turkey. According to the Kurdistan Committee in Armavir, his sister has now also joined the PKK and is currently fighting with them.

Some experts believe that the government has only succeeded in alienating the Yezidis through its education policies. One academic from Europe speaking to IWPR on the condition of anonymity said, “The state seems to be distinctly encouraging the Ezdiki faction and has not latched on to the fact that Kurmanji and Ezdiki, which were the same language for the entire Soviet period, are still the same. The most obvious and cost-effective compromise would be to produce Ezdiki-Kurdish schoolbooks in a mutually agreed alphabet.”

Kharatyan says that she proposed a solution such as this to resolve this conflict over language, but was threatened by both sides of the Yezidi community instead. The government has since said it will monitor the distribution of the controversial textbooks, but the Kurdistan Committee is now printing its own textbooks in the Latin script for distribution to Yezidi schools during the second half of November.

Knyaz Hassanov, head of the Kurdish community in Armenia, told IWPR, “These books do not concern us. They are not important and we have decided to publish our own. The overwhelming majority [of Yezidis in Armenia] consider themselves Kurds, so if 1-2,000 do not feel the same it’s not significant enough of an issue for us. Besides, it’s also their right.”

Onnik Krikorian is a British-born journalist and photojournalist who has written on Yezidis in Armenia since 1998. He has a blog from Armenia at <http://oneworld.blogspot.com>.

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