Part III

The case of Armenia

7 Religion as a factor in Kurdish identity discourse in Armenia and Turkey

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Introduction

The Kurdish factor is geopolitically important in the present phase of regional developments. It has shifted from an internal political issue in countries with a Kurdish minority into an international problem. Thus, it is now a political tool in interstate relations, manipulated by all involved countries and by Kurdish political and military organizations. Today, Kurdish organizations in Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran are trying to progress from objects of regional policy to politically self-determined subjects realizing their own political agenda. They seek the means and tools to cooperate and influence each other, without much success. These Kurdish organizations present their ambitions within new geopolitical frames: the prospect of solving the Kurdish problem, reshaping borders and regional destabilization. Furthermore, they are trying to establish a unified policy with the much smaller neighbouring Kurdish communities in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The Kurdish community in Armenia is of special importance to Kurds in Turkey, since during the Armenian genocide and deportations, many members of the Kurdish/Yezidi tribes ended up on different banks of the Araks River, forming the Kurdish community of Armenia. Today, both sides are making efforts to find common ground. In this chapter, we analyze the interaction and identity formation between the Kurdish/Yezidi communities in Turkey and Armenia within the frame of Armenian and Turkish national soft power policies. So far, there have been various contradictory academic definitions of the origin of the Kurds. The issue of the scientific definition of Kurdish ethnogenesis continues to be problematic (McDowall 2007). In this chapter, we will reconstruct the political frame of these arguments rather than contribute to theories of Kurdish ethnogenesis. There is significant discourse concerning the perception of Yezidi identity, whether it is a separate ethno-religious group or just a religion (van Bruinessen 1992, Kreyenbroek and Sperl 2000, Asatrian and Arakelova 2014, Omarkhali 2014). Some scholars as well as political leaders prefer the distinction between the "Kurdish nation" and "Yezidi religion", which understands Yezidism as religion but not an ethnic group. The vast majority of Armenian Yezidis consider themselves

as ethnic Yezidis practicing Yezidism. Thus, we reconstruct the public and emic discourses regarding these identities rather than deciding about ethno-confessional nature. Nevertheless, we believe that every individual has a right on deciding his/her ethnic and religious identity, based on his/her personal emotions, beliefs and views.

We will demonstrate how the construction of ethnic and religious identities strongly depends on politics and international relations. Furthermore, this study is a case study in the intermingling processes of ethnic, religious and national identity formations.

As we will show, the identity issues are highly politically contested. We do not take parts in this political discussion but rather present an academic reconstruction of the identity formation. The results presented in this chapter are based on extensive fieldwork. We conducted field research in Armenia, Switzerland, France, Belgium and Germany. Furthermore, we collected data from Internet sources, mass media and social media. We combined the analysis of empirical data with historical-comparative analysis and historical synthesis.

Kurds and Yezidis: ethnic and religious factors

Summarizing the approaches in classical literature on Oriental studies, the term "Kurd" as an ethnonym was traditionally applied to the ethnic group (conglomeration) occupying the highlands of the Zagros mountain range and the valley between the Tigris River on the west and the Dizful River on the east. It includes Souj-Bulagh and Ardalan in Safavid Persia, and stretches from Lake Urmia to Lorestan and North Mesopotamia (Mosul Vilayet) in Iraq (Adonts 1996).

The Kurds penetrated the Armenian Highlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, many Sunni Kurdish tribes from Safavid Persia and Mesopotamia were resettled in Western Armenia by the Turkish Sultan Selim I Yavuz for their support in the war. Starting in the second half of the sixteenth century, Turkish authorities fostered the resettlement of Kurdish tribes in the Armenian Highlands. Thus, the Ottoman Empire consciously intended to change the demographic picture of the region, aiming for the strengthening of Islam over Armenian Christianity. At the end of the sixteenth century, Ottoman sultans began massive and continuous resettlement of Kurdish tribes in the current South Caucasus territories, particularly in the Araks plain. As a result, the population of present-day Turkey is approximately 18 per cent Kurdish (*The World Factbook*: Turkey 2016).

In terms of religion, the majority of Turkey's Kurds are Sunni Muslims and followers of the Shafi'i *madhab* (one of the four religious Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence). It is this specific religious characteristic that distinguishes them from Sunni Turks and Arabs, who are mostly followers of the Hanafi school. According to van Bruinessen, the Shafi'i *madhab* was the main

factor that allowed Kurdish society to maintain a certain religious distance from the others and retain its ethnic identity (van Bruinessen 2000).

In Kurdish society, the mystical dimensions of Sunni Islam, such as the *tariqat* and orders of Sufi[1] religious philosophy, were historically common and are still present today. Among the Kurds of Turkey, Sufism has historically been accepted as an alternative expression of one's faith and as a counter-weight to the dominant religion. Many Kurdish *ashiret* or tribal leaders are also leaders of Sufi orders and *tariqat*. The dominant order in Kurdish society is the Naqshbandi order, which is one of the 12 main "mother" (*usul*) *tariqat*. It has been seen in various ways throughout the history and culture of Kurdish society, as well as throughout its relationship with the Turkish state. The *tariqat* has maintained its existence despite pressure from the Turkish state to secular-ize. It has been subject to internal ideological transformation, and its religious agenda has been reformulated around material interests. The Naqshbandi order is the most active of the Sufi *tariqat* in the political arena of Turkey today, and serves as a unique model of an Islamic sociopolitical movement. It is the most applicable tool for social interaction between politics and religion in Turkey and has played a significant role in the development of political Islam. Having formed a powerful sociopolitical and religious network, this *tariqat* is also a unique bridge between the Turkish and Kurdish societies.

Despite the principle of laicism declared by Atatürk, Islam (in its various manifestations) has been a powerful weapon for the authorities' attempts to control society throughout the history of the Republic of Turkey. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) in power today is no exception; the party uses Islam adroitly in their relations with the Kurds. With the Naqshbandi Sufi *tariqat* as a strong leaning post, the AKP managed to gain the support and trust of a considerable section of Kurdish society, both in their rise to power and in the years that followed, thus counterbalancing the atheistic leftist ideas of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) with an ideology of Islamic unity.

The other school of Islam popular among Kurds is the Nurcu movement,[2] founded by a theologian of Kurdish origin, Said Nursî (1876–1960). Nurcu is a synthesis of ideas put forward by Nursî, a Hanafi interpreter of Sunni Islam, and of Sufi mysticism, based on a pan-Islamic agenda. After the death of Said Nursî, different religious movements based on his ideology appeared, one of which consists of the teachings of Fethullah Gülen. These teachings consider high-quality secular education to be a prerequisite for the progress of the Islamic world; they support the compatibility of Islam and modernity and emphasize the necessity of dialogue with other religions (from a position of Islamic superiority). Gülen added pan-Turkism to Nursî's pan-Islamic ideas, trying to unite Turkic people and Turkic-language states under the umbrella of Islamic ideology.

Until recently, this was considered one of the most important tools for the implementation of Turkish foreign policy, especially in their relationships with Turkic-language communities. The movement had a unique and impor-tant soft power function.

The Kurds constitute a considerable number of Nurcu followers. Most of the children of the Kurdish elite study in Nurcu educational and religious institutions. This educational emphasis on the ideology of the Nurcu-Gülen movement and its activities reveals a paradox: the Kurds have subscribed to an agenda that unites people of Turkic origin and is absolutely Turkish nationalist in essence, as well as to an institution that served and had significant reconnaissance value for the interests of the Turkish state. For Kurds, membership in the Nurcu movement was an easy way to start a successful public and political career during the years of the AKP's rule. At any rate, this was the situation before the Erdoğan-Gülen conflict over the distribution of power, which turned the former ideological allies into sworn enemies.[3]

Alevism[4] is a comprehensive religious movement that is popular among the Kurds of Turkey, but that faces contrasting opinions in academic discourse. Alevism took shape as a religious movement as early as the pre-Ottoman period, penetrating the territory of what is now modern Turkey from Persia, mainly through Kurdish tribes. Alevi Kurds always faced pressure from the Sunni Muslim authorities, both during the time of the Ottoman Empire and throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. This is why the Alevis have always led a closed lifestyle within their community, trying to avoid contact with the outside world—particularly Sunni Muslims—and have hidden their religious identity, applying the Islamic practice of *taqqiya*.

Considered heretics, the Alevis of the Ottoman period were often subjected to deportation and massacres. The Alevis are also known to bear the epithets "Qizilbash" and "Bektashi".[5]

The Zazas, whose ethnic origins are again a topic of discussion in society and in academic circles, are also followers of Alevism. Are the Zazas perhaps Kurds—living concentrated in the Dersim (Tunceli) vilayet of Turkey where they are geographically isolated from the Sunni Kurds, speaking Zazaki and practicing Alevism—or are they another Iranian ethnic group? We should note that Alevism has historically united the Turks and Kurds into a single community, constantly putting the latter first in issues of national identity. Is Alevism transnational—are they perhaps Alevis first, and then Kurds? At times, Alevism has manifested more powerfully as a religious identity than a national identity. The Alevi Kurds participated in the Kurdish anti-government movements of the 1920–30s. They even collaborated with the Kemalists, thinking that the principle of secularism declared by Atatürk would save them somewhat from clashes with Sunni Islamists. This was how it remained until the Dersim incidents in 1936–38, when the government decided to make administrative changes to the Dersim region and rename it Tunceli, which was an attempt to gain more control and better manage the Alevis, who had had semi-autonomous status until then. These changes caused discontent among the Alevis and led to armed conflict between them and the authorities. Today, the Alevi Zazas demand that the authorities recognize the 1936–38 Dersim incidents as genocide.

The issue of national and ethnic identity is very relevant to the Alevi Zazas today, as it is to the Yezidis. The Zaza minority is polarized: some consider themselves Kurdish and participate in the Kurdish anti-government movement and the partisan activities of the PKK (although their numbers in the ranks of the PKK are quite small, and their participation is sometimes forced). The parliamentary elections that took place on 1 November 2015 provide a partial picture of how the Zazas self-identify, at least politically. In Dersim (Tunceli province), the pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halklarin Demokratik Partisi*, Peoples' Democratic Party), whose chairman Selahattin Demirtaş is Zaza, received 60.91 per cent of the votes on 7 July 2015 (general election for the Grand National Assembly) and 55.85 per cent of the votes on 1 November 2015 (snap second elections for the Grand National Assembly). This is quite a big achievement for the HDP, because Alevis are usually sceptical of pro-Kurdish parties and would traditionally vote for the CHP (Republican People's Party). A decisive factor here was the Zaza identity of the charismatic S. Demirtaş.

Our studies among the Alevi Zazas of Dersim have shown that there are many people in this community who consider themselves to have a different ethnic identity than the Kurds. They stubbornly lay out their differences—both ethnic and religious—and base this on language, religion, culture and historical facts.

In recent years, due in part to internal political processes in Turkey, the academic and public interest towards other religious denominations and their followers has increased significantly.

Perhaps academia will never be able to give clear answers to all the controversial questions regarding the ethnic and religious identity of the Kurds, but at this stage we can state that the specific religious characteristics of Turkey's Kurdish community function as a considerable dividing and aggravating factor. They are a serious obstacle to the consolidation of the Kurds and the formation of a united ideology and vision for the future.

These religious differences are also used by both by the Turkish authorities and external powers as potent ways to influence and gain leverage over the Kurdish community, as a means of controlling and guiding Kurdish processes for their own political gains and interests.

There is some justification for adding another group to this ethno-religious list: the Yezidis. However, in contrast to the clear ethnic term "Kurd" and the clear religious terms "Sunni", "Alevi", etc., the term "Yezidi" has a disputed religious and ethno-religious meaning. The migration of Yezidis into the current territories of the South Caucasus happened during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Yezidis escaped religious persecution from the Ottoman Turks and the Sunni Kurds who tried to convert them to Islam (Avanesov 1963).

The Yezidi (Ezdi) are an ethno-religious group whose main identity is religious—Yezidism or Sharfadin (also called Shams or sun worshippers in their own words). The exact number of Yezidis is still unknown and controversial.

Current estimates of their population is around 500,000 mostly living in Iraq (Pichon 2015). There are 35,308 Yezidis living in Armenia (according to the last census), around 18,000 in Georgia (Garcés De Los Fayos 2014) and there was also a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000 before the civil war in Syria (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2015). In Iraq there are two main concentrations of Yezidis: one in the Shaikhan district, where their most important sanctuary, the shrine of Sheikh 'Adi at Lalish is located, and one around Mount Sinjar. There are also Yezidis living in Western Europe (mainly in Germany) and in the Russian Federation (mainly in the regions of Krasnodar, Vladimir, Yaroslavl and Moscow).

The founder or the reformer of Yezidism is considered to be Sheikh 'Adi ibn Musafir (1073–1163), called Shihade or Hadi by Yezidi people. According to legend, all sheikh families derive from him. Annual pilgrimages are made to his shrine at Lalish, Iraq.

Yezidism is a syncretic doctrine which combines the belief in a sole God with the veneration of a Holy Trinity—Melek Taus (Peacock Angel), Sheikh 'Adi and Sultan Yezid (all being incarnations of God). Melek Taus, characterized as a fallen angel, is the main member of the Holy Trinity. Muslims and Christians understood this figure as the embodiment of evil, and therefore often accused Yezidis of being "devil worshippers". This was the ideological argument for several persecutions and massacres by Muslims. Yezidis believe in transmigration of souls and in gradual purification through the cycle of reincarnation. The souls of sinners may be reborn into animals, but after an expiatory period they may pass again into human form. One of the foundational myths of the Yezidis concerns their origins. According to the Yezidis, unlike all other peoples on earth who are descended from both Adam and Eve, they themselves are descended from Adam alone. In one version of their creation legend, there were 72 Adams, each of whom lived ten thousand years, and each of whom was more perfect than the previous one. The 72nd Adam married Eve. The angel Jabrail put drops of blood from the foreheads of Adam and Eve into four jars, which were then sealed for nine months. When the jars were opened, those containing Eve's blood were empty, whereas Adam's blood had produced a girl and a boy (Shahîd ibn Jayâr, "the Son of the Jar"). These two children of Adam became the ancestors of the Yezidis.

The Yezidis recognize two sacred books considered to be written in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries. The *Kitab al-Jilwa* (Book of Enlightenment) is believed to have been dictated by Sheikh 'Adi. Most of the text is concerned with the Peacock Angel, who speaks in the first person, vaunting his power and promising rewards to his devotees. Some parts of the book have been encrypted through letter substitution. The *Masxafe Resh* (Black Book) discusses the creation of humanity, how the power of evil tempts one to disobey God's commands, and certain taboos (against wearing the colour blue; eating lettuce, beans, pumpkin, fish, cock, gazelle, etc.; urinating while standing; bathing in a public bath or wearing trousers while sitting; saying the name of their God; etc.).

Important religious observances include daily prayer at sunrise; specific practices and abstentions on Wednesday, the holy day of the week; the New Year's festival, Nowruz; and the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Sheikh 'Adi at Lalish.

Yezidi society has a caste system with three main components: the sheikhs, *pir* (clergy) and *murid* (laymen). Each Yezidi is entitled to spiritual tutors from the sheikh and *pir* families, as well as a "brother" or "sister" of the "next world", because spiritual tutorship is one of the main elements of Yezidi society in terms of cultural and religious self-awareness.

Yezidism holds three main principles for preserving the Yezidi community: a ban on caste mixing, a ban on mixed marriages and the pursuance of Yezidi religious canons.

Yezidism has no system for forgiveness. Once one has broken a Yezidi religious canon, one cannot be readmitted to Yezidism nor considered a Yezidi community member. For example, a Yezidi who marries a non-Yezidi can no longer be admitted by the community. Only those born into the Yezidi community can belong to the religion; the Yezidis do not accept any converts or re-converts. However, the recent developments in Sinjar (Iraq) showed that there can be some exceptions to the general rules, as hundreds of Yezidi women kidnapped and enslaved by ISIS were viewed as victims and readmitted to the community after being freed. This is an unprecedented phenomenon, as Yezidis don't normally forgive women who have had physical relations with men of other religions (Furlani 1940).

Identity issues: ethnicity vs. religion

There is significant academic and political discourse concerning the perception of Yezidi identity, whether it is a separate ethno-religious group or just a religion. The first group of scholars and political leaders uses the term "Kurdish nation, Yezidi religion", which shows Yezidism as a religion but not an ethnicity, while the second group refers to Yezidis as a separate ethnicity. The first group argues that although the vast majority of Armenian Yezidis consider themselves ethnic Yezidis, Kurds claim that there is no such ethnicity and that these are ethnic Kurds who practice the Yezidi religion. Indeed, they accept this as the original religion of ancient Kurdish people, who were later converted to Islam. It is quite common in the academic sphere to consider Yezidis ethnic Kurds. For example, the Kurdish writer Karlen Chachani argues that 'Kurds are one people, who speak one language, and have one Kurdistan. There is no such thing as a Yezidi nation, or a Yezidistan' (Abrahamian 1992). Christine Allison says she has met many Yezidis in Armenia who believe they are also Kurds. Philip Kreyenbroek affirms: 'The Yezidi religious and cultural tradition is deeply rooted in Kurdish culture, and almost all Yezidi sacred texts are in Kurdish' (Krikorian 2006).

One of the main arguments used by scholars viewing Yezidis as ethnic Kurds is the language both Kurds and Yezidis speak: Kurmanji, the northern

dialect of Kurdish. It belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. Armenia's Yezidis use the Cyrillic alphabet for writing, although depending on location the Yezidis have used other diverse scripts: Arabic (in Syria and Iraq), Latin (in Europe and Turkey) and Armenian (in Armenia).

The second group of scholars and local political leaders, while accepting that the language is similar, refuse to call it Kurdish and call it Yezdiki instead (in the case of Armenian Yezidis). They argue that different ethnic groups can speak the same language, using French-speaking Arabs and Frenchmen as an example. Moreover, some Armenian Yezidis argue that there are certain words and terms that are specific to Yezdiki and not preserved in Kurdish. Sheikh Hasane Mahmood Tamoyan, deputy president of the National Union of Yezidis in Armenia, is one of those who denies any connection between Yezidis and Kurds or Kurmanji. Sheikh Hasane stated that Yezidis are a separate nation as 'Yezidism cannot be considered the name of the religion only, because no nation in the world is named after its religion'. He further claimed that the 'Yezidi alphabet is the alphabet of the Yezidi people', as there are no religious alphabets (Abrahamian 1992).

Despite the possible ethnic and linguistic similarities, our research shows that there is a large gap between Yezidis and Kurds, mainly due to the religious differences which often make these two groups hostile to one another. Yezidis are considered "devil worshippers" by the Sunni Muslim Kurds, who have continuously persecuted them. Muslim Kurds (as well as other Muslims) are accused of major anti-Yezidi persecutions and atrocities, including participation in the Armenian genocide of 1915–1924 in which thousands of Yezidis were also slaughtered.

However, a small minority of Yezidis in Armenia (2,162 people, according to the 2011 Armenian census) consider themselves to be ethnically Kurdish and not Yezidi. This minority is still Yezidi from the point of view of religion, but tends to separate its religious identity (Yezidi) from its ethnic identity (Kurdish). The appeal of being a Yezidi-Kurd may be based on the desire for their smaller group to belong to a greater ethnic entity (Kurds) with a potential large homeland (Kurdistan). A significant number of intelligentsia fall among this group.

Concluding the above data, there are some academic challenges in examining the Kurdish/Yezidi ethnic and religious identity discourse. We will analyze these intermingling identities more closely in the following section by isolating the Armenian case.

The Kurdish/Yezidi community in Armenia

Yezidis are the largest ethno-religious minority group in Armenia. Their community is a conservative and rural one which draws attention from scholars due to its well-preserved religious and oral traditions (Omarkhali 2014). They live in different parts of Armenia, mainly in the northwestern

provinces (*marzer*) of Armavir, Aragatsotn, Ararat, Yerevan, Kotayk, Shirak and Lori. There are more than 22 rural Yezidi settlements in Armenia; and in Aragatsotn, for example, there are around 19 Yezidi villages. The largest Yezidi village in Armenia, with around 4,300 residents, is Verin Artashat (in Ararat). Some of the other Yezidi villages are RyaTaza, Jamshlu, Shenkani, Derek, Avshen, Sadunts, Sangyar and Sipan in the Aragats district; Baysz, Metsadzor, Barozh, Gyalto, Tlik, Gabaghtapa and Sorik in the Talin district; Shamiram in the Ashtarak district; and Yeraskhahun and Ferik in the Etchmiadzin district. In 1917, many Yezidis living in the Ottoman Empire had to leave the Kars vilayet and settle in today's Armenian Aparan and Talin regions and in several settlements in the Ararat valley. As a result, contemporary Yezidis in Armenia are represented by the Sipki, Hasni, Zukri, Ortli and Rashki tribes. The representatives of these tribes who had to remain in Turkey were mostly converted to Islam and assimilated with the Kurds.

During the Soviet period, Yezidis were registered as Kurds and weren't considered a separate ethno-religious minority, unlike in contemporary Armenia where Kurds and Yezidis are registered as different nations. The Kurds of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, who were living outside their historical motherland, organized themselves and created their own institutional bodies to preserve their ethnic identity, language and cultural values.

Ironically, the Soviet era was a turning point for Armenian Kurds/Yezidis in terms of discovering and studying their own history and culture, as well as maintaining their ethno-cultural identity by practicing their language, religion and culture freely. The Kurdish/Yezidi minority was one of the largest in Soviet Armenia. According the census of 1926, there were 15,262 Kurds/Yezidis, making up 1.7 per cent of Armenia's population, and by 1989 the number had risen to 56,127 or 1.6 per cent of the population (Hakobyan 2016).

It is noteworthy that the first Yezidi school in Armenia was opened in 1920, and the *Shams* (Sun) alphabet textbook was created in 1921 by Armenian scholar Hagop 'Lazo' Ghazaryan. The first film about Kurdish life, called *Zareh* (1925), was also shot in Armenia. In 1930 the first Kurmanji newspaper, *Ria Taza* (New Path), was established by Armenian writers Hrachya Kochar and Harutyun Mkrtchyan to publish the literary works of Kurdish/Yezidi writers. In 1934, the Kurdish branch of the Armenian Writer's Union was established. More than 50,000 books in Kurmanji, Armenian and Russian were published on all aspects of Kurdish/Yezidi culture and distributed worldwide (Abrahamian 1992). The first Kurdish/Yezidi State Theatre, Alagyaz, was also formed in Armenia. Later, in 1955, Kurmanji Radio Hour broadcasted its first programme; it continues to operate daily to this day. Public Radio of Armenia is the only state radio station with programmes in Kurmanji, which has made it possible to keep up contact between Armenian and Kurdish communities abroad and stimulate the formation of national self-consciousness among Kurds.

In the 1970s, Yerevan State University opened a Kurdish Studies Department, which was later closed due to a lack of enrolment. In 1969, a Kurdish Studies Department was also founded within the larger Institute of Oriental Studies at the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, which did research on Kurdish/Yezidi history, philology, culture, Armeno-Kurdish/Yezidi relations, etc.

In 1988, along with perestroika and the process of reassessing national and religious identity, a strong Yezidi movement led by Yezidi religious leaders Azize Amar, Karame Salon, Sheikh Hasane Mahmood Tamoyan and Hasane Hasanyan began in Armenia. Their goal was to be officially recognized by the government as their own ethnicity, separate from the Kurds. As a result of the third All-Armenian Yezidi Assembly on 30 September 1989, the Yezidis were registered as a separate minority in the 1989 USSR population census. Thus, 88 per cent of those formerly classified as Kurds identified themselves as Yezidi, aiming to be represented separately from Muslim Kurds (Asatrian and Arakelova 2002). In order to restore their national and religious identity, leaders of the Yezidi community (under Sheikh Hasane's initiative) opened their own school in Yerevan in 1990, and in 1991 began to publish a separate bi-weekly newspaper, *Dinge Yezdi* (Yezidi Voice). On the other side, Kurds began to issue *Zagros* (formerly called *Mesopotamia*), the official magazine of The National Council of Kurds in Armenia. Both *Zagros* and *Ria Taza* exist thanks to community contributions and annual support from the Armenian state budget. The newspapers reflect upon issues within the community and developments in the Kurdish problem in the region.

Nine new Yezidi and Kurdish NGOs were then established (according to the Armenian Ministry of Culture) and the Yezidi Clerical Council was registered at the Committee of Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of Armenia. As of 2016, the Yezidi community is represented in almost all public sectors. There are a great number of Yezidi NGOs, such as the Yezidi National Committee, the World Union of Yezidis, the Yezidi National Union of Armenia and the World, the Yezidi National Union, Sinjar Yezidi National Union, Media-Shangal Yezidi National Union and others. In parallel, there are several Kurdish NGOs operating in Armenia: the Kurdistan Committee, the Organization of Kurdish Intellectuals and the National Council of Kurds in Armenia. The latter now coordinates the works of the other organizations.

Due to Armenia's tolerant national and religious minority policy, Yezidis do not feel discriminated against and share equal rights with citizens of Armenian descent (personal interviews with W. Eşo, 19/6/2014, B. Murazi, 18/2/2015, K. Hasanov, 3/6/2014). They have always integrated well into Armenian society and had freedom of religion and non-interference in their cultural traditions; according to them, the Armenian government does not treat the Armenian majority preferentially. In 2006, UNICEF supported the Armenian government's project to publish a textbook for ethnic minorities, and new Yezidi language (Yezdiki) textbooks were published and distributed among Yezidi schools around the country in 2007. On 29 September 2012,

the Zariat temple, the first Yezidi temple outside of their homeland in Lalish, was opened in Armenia's Armavir province. The construction of this temple was financed by a Russian Yezidi from Yaroslavl. The 2007 US Department of State Human Rights Report states: 'As in previous years, Yezidi leaders did not complain that police and local authorities subjected their community to discrimination' (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2008). The only problems they indicate are of a socioeconomic nature, but Yezidis and Armenians both suffer from the same economic hardships (Yoffe 2007). Moreover, Yezidis confirm that Armenia was one of very few states to help the Yezidis in preserving their cultural and religious identity and traditions.

However, one of the main problems for Yezidis is underrepresentation in the legislative and executive bodies of Armenia. There are also some reports of Yezidis wanting to immigrate to Europe, particularly to Germany, because of discrimination and persecution, although in practice this may be part of a strategy of inventing anti-Yezidi stories in order to receive beneficial refugee status in the EU (Yoffe 2007).

Armenian and Turkish policy towards Kurdish/Yezidi groups

Perceptions of soft power policy are linked to the state's use of a number of different cultural manipulation mechanisms to serve its own political interests. In this context, the aforementioned fluid identifications can be viewed as a good basis for manipulative policies. The following analysis will show how Kurdish and Yezidi groups became the objects of national policies. We concentrate especially on soft power policies in contrast to military power. We will separately analyze first Armenian and then Turkish policy.

The nature of Armenia's state soft power policy is debatable, depending on one's point of view. There have been several reports in recent media on the Armenian state's possible involvement in Kurdish/Yezidi ethno-religious fragmentation, claiming that Armenia is realizing a soft power policy to divide the Kurdish nation. These claims were also made by some of our interviewees, who reported cases of government support for Yezidi national and religious identity, considering it implementation of a unique domestic soft power policy. For example, some of them point out the approval of the construction of a Yezidi shrine in the Armavir region and the support for Yezidi schools and kindergartens.

However, it is not logical to regard the Armenian internal soft power policy as splitting the Kurd/Yezidi identity, given that the Yezidi identity already has a long history in Northern Iraq, where they are autochthonous. Because of their national and religious Yezidi identity, they have been persecuted and brutally slaughtered by ISIS in the Sinjar Mountains since summer 2014 (as of late 2016, the number Yezidi of victims is reported to be around 17,000). Many women and young Yezidi girls (9–14 years old) were captured, enslaved and raped by Islamists. Hundreds of Yezidi families fled to Turkey and settled in refugee camps in Batman and Silopi.

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These claims about Armenia's policy of support for Yezidi culture view it as destructive towards the Kurdish/Yezidi community, rather than as an important step towards democracy and human rights development in Armenia and towards recognition of the Yezidis' right to ethnic and religious self-identification.

Our research among Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi community, involving social and political leaders and experts, shows a rather paradoxical case of Armenia not having a coordinated or clearly formed soft power policy towards the Kurdish/Yezidi community. Joseph Nye's original "soft power" concept is not always applicable to the few existent cases or political situations, as they are not state-directed and continuous. The lack of a structured soft power policy can be considered poor strategic planning in need of improvement on the part of post-Soviet Armenia. So, we can conclude that there is no significant coordinated soft power policy implemented by the Armenian state towards the Kurdish/Yezidi community.

In contrast to Armenia, where the Yezidis are a small minority (1.3 per cent), Kurds compose approximately 18 per cent of the total population of Turkey[6] and are concentrated in the southeastern vilayets (districts) where they compose the absolute majority: Diyarbakir, Bitlis, Van, Siirt, Shanliurfa, Mardin, Batman, Ağri, Mush, Erzurum and Hakkâri. Standards of living in the above-mentioned vilayets have been four to five times lower than the middle standard of living in Turkey for decades, as a consequence of discriminatory economic policies implemented by the government (Hasratyan 1990). Approximately 60–70 per cent of the population here is mainly engaged in agriculture. As a rule, large enterprises compose a very small percentage (McDowall 2007). Despite the refugees from Iraq, there is only a small number of people identifying as Yezidi living in Turkey today, reportedly 5,000 people (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2013). They mainly reside in southeastern Turkey in Yezidi villages and in Batman and Mardin. According to the data of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, around 37,000 Yezidis lived in Turkey in 1912 (Prothero 1920).

The Kurds' relationship with the Turkish government has been very difficult and contradictory since the formation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. The Lausanne Peace Conference de jure denied Kurdish ethnic identity within the newly-formed state. As a result, Kurds, being Muslims, did not get the status of a national minority. This issue deepened after 3 March 1924, when Atatürk abolished the Ottoman Caliphate. With the separation of religion and state, Islam became less important to the Turkish state-building process. Thus, the last ideological link connecting Kurds and Turks and the most important symbol of Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood was eliminated (Tan 2010).

It is hard to disentangle Kurdish and Islamic sentiment in the first insurrection against Atatürk's regime, but the attachment to Islam in these insurrections took the form of attachment to an Islamic leader, usually a *tariqat* sheikh. Generally, the religiosity of the (Sunni) Kurds is expressed

through their loyalty to a sheikh. Modernist and fundamentalist currents in Islam have not made serious progress among the Kurds.

Kurds began to distrust the Turkish state, which had made Turkism the state ideology instead of religion. Though Kurds composed the majority of the population of the eastern vilayets, the Kurdish language and Kurdish culture in all its forms were prohibited. The Kurds were theoretically considered "Turks", but were deprived of their national and civil rights and were still practically being considered "Kurds". Turkish propaganda activities took huge strides towards implementing this policy. Historiography, literature and media tried in various ways to prove that Kurds had Turkish-Oghuz origins.

The policy of assimilation and negligence towards the rights of national minorities was always part of the constitutions of the Republic of Turkey.[7] Before the AKP came to power, the government's approach to the Kurdish issue was a 'policy of denial, oppression, fear and assimilation' (Tan 2010, p. 252–253). Especially in the developed western regions of the country, where Turkish customs and traditions were dominant, most Kurds assimilated into Turkish society. They took on Turkish traditions, began to dress like Turks, spoke Turkish and lost their national self-definition. Thus, the state realized a clearly designed strict assimilation policy towards Kurdish national self-consciousness.

However, some Kurds resisted Turkish policy with the help of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has organized the most comprehensive and long-lasting Kurdish movement in Turkey in the last few centuries. The key to the PKK's success is that it refused the religious, tribal principle typical of Kurdish political groups and based its activities on Kurdish national self-definition. It's indisputable that the PKK had a primary role in awakening Kurdish national self-consciousness.

Coming to power in Turkey in 2002–2003, the AKP opened a new phase for the Kurdish people. The Islamic factor and general democratic liberties were integrated into Turkey's Kurdish policy. This was quite a bold step, considering that it contradicted the principle of laicism, one of the main doctrines of Kemalism. Over the previous few centuries, ideas for a solution to the Kurdish problem were the subject of broad inner political and public discussion in Turkey. The new AKP policy had certain results: the abolition of the taboo around Kurds and new geopolitical developments gave Kurds in Turkey a chance to establish their ethnic identity and be successfully integrated into regional activities. They also try to carry out their own ethnic and religious soft power policies towards the Kurdish communities in neighbouring countries. The AKP has a large number of Kurdish voters, conditioned by the socioeconomic reforms carried out by the government in the regions populated by Kurds. The AKP even began successful negotiations with the PKK, resulting in a declaration of peace (Alasor and Sarkisian 2015).

It was obvious that the Turkish government was trying to achieve its objectives through interactions with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. The negotiations between the AKP and Ocalan in 2013 resulted in Ocalan

declaring a ceasefire and the PKK starting to leave the territory of Turkey. These negotiations were conducted by the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), led by Hakan Fidan.

On 7 February 2016, then-Prime Minister Davutoğlu announced in Mardin that Abdullah Ocalan will not participate in the regulatory process of the Kurdish issue. After isolating Ocalan, the Turkish government launched major military actions against the PKK and political persecution towards the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

During the recent armed conflicts, 483 Turkish soldiers were killed and 2,859 were injured. According to the official Turkish data on armed actions against the Kurds, 7,078 Kurdish guerrillas were killed, including PKK losses during a Turkish Air Force bombing in Iraqi Kurdistan (Hürriyet 2016). It is clear that since the snap elections in November, the political situation has changed and Erdoğan has developed a new plan for the Kurdish issue.

Foreign soft power-policy towards the Kurdish/Yezidi community in Armenia

The Kurdish/Yezidi minority in Armenia is at the crossroads of different political interests and is therefore the object of different actors' policies. In the following section, we will examine the different aspects of any potential soft power policy implemented towards Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi community.

According to data collected during our fieldwork in Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi villages in the Kotayk, Shirak and Aragatsotn provinces, cooperation between Armenia's and Turkey's Yezidis is intertribal and personal in nature. Despite affiliation to the same tribes, relations between Armenia's Yezidis and Turkey's assimilated Kurds were disrupted by their religious differences. However, some interpersonal communications among Yezidi groups have been restored. Boris Murazi, the president of the Sinjar Yezidi National Union NGO in Armenia, stated in his interview that he has visited the Yezidi refugee camp in Batman, Turkey several times, has personal contacts there and sometimes engages in cooperation with them. His latest trip was several months ago, after the August 2014 events in Sinjar, Iraq, when he visited Batman with a group of activists to bring humanitarian aid and moral support to those in survival camps. Thus, we can state that there is cooperation between Yezidis in Armenia and Turkey, but not systematically.

On the other hand, cooperation between Armenian and Iraqi Yezidis seems to have broadened in recent years, both at the state level and personally or socially. Formal meetings between Armenian and Northern Iraqi statesmen have taken place in Yerevan and Erbil on a periodic basis. In the context of developing political and economic cooperation between Armenia and Northern Iraq, a decision has been made to open an Armenian consulate in Erbil. In addition, regular Yerevan-Baghdad-Erbil flights began to operate on 26 February 2015.

State policy, in turn, results in an intention to develop ties on a personal and social basis. Armenian Yezidi youth, especially those involved in local NGOs, seem to have a willingness for broader communication with the Iraqi Yezidi minority, as they feel more emotionally connected to them than to Turkey's Yezidis.

The closed border between Turkey and Armenia makes any direct cooperation difficult. For this reason, there is evidence that communication between the Kurds on either side of the Araks river is primarily coordinated through transnational Kurdish organizations based in EU countries and elsewhere.

The main discussions are about the transnationally organized PKK having contact with Armenia's Kurds/Yezidis or even having a presence in Armenia. During our interviews and informal talks, we found no empirical evidence of the PKK's presence in Armenia. The PKK is a political organization with strong military elements, which is also recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey and many other states, so its presence in Armenia does not correspond to Turkish state interests in the present geopolitical situation. Considering the existence of its Kurdish minority, Armenia may be reluctantly drawn into the Kurdish problem in Turkey. At the same time, there is an internal barrier to PKK penetration: Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi community has no great interest in the PKK's activities. Still, there is some indication that the PKK is implementing a soft power policy towards Armenia's Kurds/Yezidis. During our interviews, several Kurds/Yezidis stated that the PKK is trying to influence their community's youth through Kurdish organizations based in European countries (such as the Kurdish Institute of Paris, Kurdish Institute of Brussels[8], etc.) by offering them education and work opportunities in Europe. Several Yezidis also said that different European Kurdish organizations have offered them financial support for propagating the ideologies of the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. These Yezidis not only refused, but were deeply offended. They viewed it as a dishonour to their identity and religion and an attempt at assimilation. On the other hand, Brussels-based pro-PKK Kurds expressed their concerns about Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi community during informal talks, claiming that Yezidis are ethnic Kurds who should not identify themselves separately, and Yezidism is the original religion of ancient Kurdish people. Thus, the PKK uses the ethnic factor as one of its most powerful soft power tools to emotionally impact the Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi community, while downplaying the religious factor.

The PKK's main interest in Armenia's Yezidi/Kurdish community is to influence them ideologically and use them in pro-PKK projects, keeping in mind the possibility of the future creation of Kurdistan and the opportunity to use Armenia's Kurdish factor to that end. However, as noted above, they don't achieve the desired results because Armenia's Yezidis prefer to emphasize their ethno-religious identity as an established and respected national minority in Armenia.

So, we can state that one of the main obstacles for cooperation between Turkey's and Armenia's Kurds/Yezidis is the major difference in religious

Proof

discourse, specifically Yezidism vs. Sunni Islam, which affects perceived identity and enlarges the ideological gap between them.

Concerning the relations between Armenia's (non-Yezidi) Kurds and the PKK and Turkey's Kurdish parties, there might be some contact on a personal level, but there are no organizational connections. This is evidenced by European Kurdish NGO members expressing their disappointment with Armenia's Kurdish community, which is not willing to cooperate with them.

There are nonetheless some interpersonal communications between the Kurds/Yezidis living in Turkey and in Armenia. Kurdish scholars such as Yaşar Kemal and politicians such as Osman Baydemir have visited Armenia and its Kurdish/Yezidi community over the last several years to try to find ways to cooperate with Armenia-based Kurdish/Yezidi organizations. This shows that despite the closed borders and Kurdish/Yezidi ethno-religious discourse, some cooperation exists between Turkey's and Armenia's Kurdish/Yezidi people.

Thus, we can conclude that in this context, religion is implemented as soft power in two ways: towards and by Kurdish/Yezidi people. The Kurdish/Yezidi transnational organizations, such as NGOs, private universities and schools, foundations and media try to implement a "state-like" policy towards the global Kurdish/Yezidi population, often using elements of soft power. This is usually realized through EU-based organizations, due to the rather large and influential Kurdish/Yezidi communities in Europe. We have done research on the most active Kurdish institutions—the Kurdish Institute of Paris in France and the Kurdish Institute in Brussels—as well as had meetings and informal workshops with Kurdish community leaders and representatives, academics and journalists. What we found is that Kurdish, pro-PKK organizations are bigger and more widely represented in France, Belgium, Sweden, Germany and Austria. Moreover, most of the EU-based Kurdish organizations are propagating PKK ideology and Kurdish nationalism. Their main target groups are Kurds/Yezidis living in the EU, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Armenia is also targeted, but not as much, because of the small size of its Kurdish/Yezidi minority and lowered expectations of its influence. According to personal meetings and workshops in the Kurdish Institute of Paris and Kurdish Studies Institute in Brussels, the interests of these two organizations are much more connected to Turkey's Kurds than to Armenia's. Meanwhile, both have personal contacts with the Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi community and occasionally try to implement small-scale educational projects and student exchanges to attract Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi youth. However, they are not satisfied with the reaction in the Armenian Kurdish/Yezidi minority because the predominant Yezidi community in Armenia often rejects any EU-based pro-PKK Kurdish support, preferring better and more developed cooperation with the German and Northern Iraqi Yezidi minority. European Yezidis mainly reside and organize in Germany, and they support the Yezidi identity formation that has become a mark against Kurdish nationalist identity formation over the last few years.

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One of the main barriers for the realization of this Kurdish soft power policy is the identity of Yezidism, which has a closed community structure and is hardly open to foreign penetration. Kurdish organizations from Turkey and the EU are trying to realize consistent soft power policies towards Armenia's Yezidis, using ideological, cultural and linguistic factors as psychological tools to convert them to Kurdish identity. At the same time, Armenia's (non-Yezidi) Kurdish community is not of great interest for the external influence of non-Armenian Kurds, because of its small numbers (around 2,100 people in all of Armenia). Therefore, Kurds from outside Armenia are more interested in the Yezidis, who are Armenia's largest minority group. The efforts and policies towards Armenian Yezidis haven't had noticeable results yet, because the strong religious identity of the Yezidis acts as a barrier against external influences.

Conclusion

Religious and ethnic identities play influential roles in how nations and NGOs are politically positioned towards the Kurdish conflict, and how Kurdish groups are allied across different nations. The dual religious-ethnic identity is a real barrier for Kurdish nation-building, and is thus easily subjected to foreign influence. Religion is one element of identity that can be particularly manipulative. The religious differences amongst the Kurds (Naqshbandi, Nurcu, Yezidi, Alevi, etc.) are potent ways to influence and gain leverage over the Kurdish community and are used by both the Turkish authorities and external powers to control and guide Kurdish processes for their own political gains and interests. This is especially relevant in the communities that are still in the process of identity formation. These fluid identities are the main targets for soft power policies.

The original understanding of 'soft power', as an element of a state's foreign policy, is seemingly not quite applicable to this study because Kurds do not have a state. However, the analysis shows how the religious factor can become an element of international relations even among non-state actors. Thus, we can consider this a specific case of soft power transformation and draw the following conclusions.

Generally, unclear or fluid ethnic and religious identity markers can become a matter of division because of the regional political situation. In this context, the PKK and Kurdish transnational organizations primarily support Kurdish ethno-nationalism. In terms of Turkey's minority policy, there is a new tendency in recent years towards acceptance of religious minorities, including Yezidis and Alevis. This can divide the larger Kurdish community into smaller subgroups, thus acting against national consolidation around the PKK. Religion is used as an instrument of soft power in the AKP's Kurdish policy to separate the Kurdish community from the PKK. Therefore, Turkey realizes a fluid and situational policy towards Kurds and Kurdish trans-national organizations using Islam as a soft power tool.

At the same time, the Armenian state supports Yezidi identity as a specific ethno-religious identity. Consequently, Yezidis integrate in Armenia and only loosely cooperate with Kurdish groups outside Armenia. Thus, religious identity turns out to be a relevant factor in transnational soft power policies.

Notes

1 The term "Sufi" was first applied to Muslim ascetics who clothed themselves in coarse garments of wool (*şūūf*). From this comes the form *taşawwuf* for "mysticism". (Trimingham 1971)
2 This movement has quite an influential ideological foundation, based on Said Nursî's renowned work *Risale-i-Nur* (Letters of Divine Light), which is a 6,000-page interpretation of the Qur'an. Nursî's followers are called Nurcular (from the word *nur* meaning "light") and the movement is called Nurcemaat.
3 On 15–16 July 2016, President Erdoğan blamed F. Gülen and the movement he led for the attempted military coup in Turkey, which was followed by the political persecution and arrests of those people who had had any connection to the movement.
4 There are varying points of view in the academic discourse on the origins of Alevism. In particular, one view says that it did not originate as a division of Islam but rather formed over a number of years as a result of the fusion of Christianity—including Christian sects—and Islam, carrying over the influence of some pagan traditions as well. This explains the presence of different elements of those religious denominations in the Alevi creed and ceremonies. There does not exist a single accepted version of the etymology and origins of the name "Alevi". The Alevis themselves cannot clearly define the history of their name. A majority of them link it to the name of the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, Ali, who is also the husband of his daughter Fatima, thus explaining the major influence of Shi'ism on Alevism.
5 Kurdish tribes had come from Safavid Persia and mandatorily wore red head-dresses, which they would wrap in such a way as to produce 12 layers, each bearing one of the names of the 12 imams. Later, the name Qizilbash took on a negative and pejorative meaning, perceived as a "faithless rebel" or an "immoral person." Bektashi is related to the name of one of the main saints of Alevism, Haji Bektash Veli. According to tradition, he is from the tribe of Ali. Perhaps the main reason for linking Alevism to Ali is the need to not be perceived by the Sunnis as unreligious or faithless. We should note that both Turkish society and the authorities have always had different attitudes towards the Qizilbash and the Bektashi. The latter enjoy a more respected status.
6 It is practically impossible to present data on the Kurdish population of Turkey as the official data and the numbers from the Kurdish side do not match. The perceptions of the "Kurdish community" are also diametrically opposed. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, there are 22,691,824 Kurds in Turkey, mostly born in Kurdish cities in the southeast of the country. Therefore, out of Turkey's 74.7 million citizens, more than 30 per cent are Kurds. These records only include people who have been registered at official government institutions (Dakak 2012).
7 Article 88 of the 1924 Constitution: 'The name Turk as a political term shall be understood to include all citizens of the Turkish Republic, without distinction of, or reference to, race and religion (…)' (Earle 1925). 'Everyone bound to the Turkish State through the bond of citizenship is a Turk. The child of a Turkish father or a Turkish mother is a Turk'. (Sentence repealed on October 3, 2001; Act No. 4709)

(Article 66 of the current Constitution as of 2016) www.anayasa.gov.tr/icsayfalar/mevzuat/1982anayasas%C4%B1.html.

8   The Kurdish Institute of Brussels was established in 1978. Its goal is to foster cultural and social development of the Kurdish community in Belgium and in Kurdistan. The Kurdish Institute of Brussels is recognized by multiple government ministries and the city of Brussels. It collaborates with research units at universities and high schools, cultural and community centers, peace organizations, human rights organizations and NGOs. See www.kurdishinstitute.be/kurdish-institute-of-brussels-1/

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