

PAPER DETAILS

TITLE: A DESCRIPTIVE EFFORT ON THE OTTOMANS-YEZIDIS' UNJUST RELATIONS: A
RELATIONSHIP IN THE SHADE OF VIOLENCE

AUTHORS: Oral ORPAK

PAGES: 1-20

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1831139>

A DESCRIPTIVE EFFORT ON THE OTTOMANS-YEZIDIS' UNJUST RELATIONS: A RELATIONSHIP IN THE SHADE OF VIOLENCE (HEWILDANEKE TESWÎRÎ LI SER TÊKILIYÊN BÊDADÎ YÊN OSMANÎYAN ÊN LI HEMBERÎ ÊZÎDIYAN: TÊKILIYÊK LI BIN SÎYA ZORÊ)

Oral ORPAK*

Article Type: Research Article // Gotara Lêkolînî

Received // Hatîn: 18.06.2021

Accepted // Pejirandin: 14.10. 2021

Published // Weşandin: 30.11.2021

Pages // Rûpel: 1-20

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Citation/Atif: Orpak, Oral, (2021). A Descriptive Effort On The Ottomans-Yezidis' Unjust Relations: A Relationship In The Shade Of Violence, *Kurdiname*, no. 5, p.1-20

Plagiarism/Întihal: This article has been reviewed by at least two referees and scanned via ithenticate plagiarism website // Ev gotar herî kêr ji aliyê 2 hakekan va hatiye nirxandin û di malpera întihalê ithenticate ra hatiye derbaskirin.

Abstract

The paper aims to provide a descriptive introduction to the Ottomans' aggressive policies towards Yezidis from the 16th century to the end of the 19th century. The Ottomans had not established an explicit state policy based on enmity against Yezidis at the beginning of the 16th century. Nonetheless vitriolic discourse quickly took root in the agenda of local rulers. Muslim leaders' fatwas in particular instigated the central government's hostile policies in the mid-16th century. Yezidis, therefore, became an integral part of the Ottomans' aggressive policies of conversion to Islam and then conscription into army from the mid-16th century onwards. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the Ottomans' agenda towards Yezidis took shape within the framework of the force and even the violence under the pan-Islamist policies of Hamidian regime.

Key words: Yezidis, the Ottomans, conversion, conscription

Kurte

Armanca vê gotarê ev e ku nasdaneke teswîrî li ser rêbazên Osmaniyan ên dijminîkariyê yên li dijî Êzîdiyan pêşkêş bike ku ev rêbaz ji aliyê Osmaniyan ve ji salên 1500'an heta salên 1900'an li deverên Êzîdiyan hatin bicihanîn.

Her çî qas di destpêka sedsalên 1600'an de rêbazên Osmaniyan ên dijî Êzîdiyan li gor dijminatî çênebûn, lê di gotinên û nivîsên fermanên misilman ên deverî de dijminatîyeke dijvar dijî Êzîdiyan hebû. Û ew axiftin û gotinên wan hikûmeta navendî azirandibû û rêbazên neyar ên di nîviya sedsalên 1500'an de hatibûn qebûl kirin. Ji ber vê Êzîdî bûn parçeyek esasi di rêbazên êrîşker ên Osmaniyan yên serbazkirina Êzîdiyan û veguherandina dinê wan de. Bi texmîniyek qewet, di seranserên sedsalên 1700'an û 1800'an de rojevên Osmaniyan ên dijî Êzîdiyan çarçeweyeke xurtî û heta zordarî hebû di bin rêbazên "pan-Islamî" yên hikûmeta Abdulhamîd.

Peyvên kîld: Êzîdî, Osmanî, veguherandin, serbazkirin

* Ph.D. Candidate, Maria Curia-Sklodowska University, Doctoral School of Social Sciences, Political Science and Public Administration, oralorpak@gmail.com, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6579-4516>.

Introduction

The area that has become Iraq (the Arab name for Mesopotamia) today, where the main Yezidis' sacred places are located, was divided into three governorates during the Ottoman era: Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. These centers had served as the heartland of the Abbasid Caliphate, ruled from Baghdad from the 9th through the 11th centuries. With the destruction of Baghdad in 1258 and the end of the Abbasid Caliphate, Iraq's irrigation-based agriculture began to fall into disrepair. And various tribal confederations of Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomans battled for dominance (Agoston-Maters, 2009: 282). During the 10th and 11th centuries, several Kurdish dynasties such as the Shaddadids, Hasanwaydhids, Marwanids and Annazids were powerful in their lands (Transcaucasia, Dinawar, Diyarbakir and Hulwan respectively) and wiped out by the invasion of Seljuk Turks in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Bozarslan, 2021: 2).

In the 16th century, the Ottomans emerged in Yezidis' districts. After that time, the ethnic and religious aspects of the social life of Yezidis became part of the Ottomans' administrative affairs. The Yezidi-Ottoman relationship was subsequently shaped by different policies within three periods of the state:

- 1) The classical period in which the Ottomans considered non-muslim groups as 'heretical groups' in terms of obedience to the state.
- 2) The Tanzimat reform period when the state aimed to transform state-society relations and to create equal citizenship by abolishing the political distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims.
- 3) The Hamidian period when the regime officially adopted conversionary and conscription policies versus Yezidis.

Conceptual framework and methodology

The study relies on the terms *Yezidi*, *Yezidism*, *tekfir*, *firman*, and *fatwa*. Scholars working on Yezidis prefer the concepts of Yezidis and Yezidism in their works in terms of the contemporary academic discourse. The terms of Yezidi and Yazid appear extensively in many academic works. In a classical sense, likewise, the concepts of Êzîd, Êzî, and Izid refer to the Yezidi community.

In Yezidi religious tradition, in particular in orally transmitted sacred texts, there are no clear details on the exact origin of the concept of Yezid or Yazid. However, As Rodziewicz (2018a) points out, there are some details on the origin of Yezidis in some Yezidi hymns (Qewlê Baranî). They use the concept of the "millet" which corresponds to nation in modern Kurdish and to Êzîd in Yezidis' discourse, and the concept of "sunnet" which refers to a set of norms and practices, that stretch from pre-Islamic times. They see themselves as the descendants of those who did not follow Muhammad's revolution. Moreover, they see Mecca as an ancient religious cult, and they link Sheikh Adi's genealogy to the Quraysh branch as the descendant of the Umayyad caliph Marwan II (Rodziewicz, 2018a: 67-78). Thus, in Yezidi religious texts many narratives on Yazid bin Muawiya appear. But these narratives may not be sufficient for the origin of the Yezidi name to be connected with Yazid bin Muawiya. Debates on the origin of the term Yezid are ongoing. Many suggest that the origin of the term Yezid is connected to the city of Yazd. As Açıkyıldız (2010) stresses, this may derive from Yazad, Yazd or Yazdan

in Middle Persian and Kurdish, meaning Yazdan “God” or Izid “Angel” in new Persian (Açıkyıldız, 2010: 35).

However, there has been as much argument on the subject of the term “Yezid” among scholars as there has been on the origin of their religion. According to a common argument, the term Yezid derives from the city of Yazd in Iran, where associated with Zoroastrians. Some western scholars claim that Yezidis are apostate because they are among the first communities who renounced Islam. But in fact, they may not be the first apostate group. Because the apostate name was used for Arabs who left Islam after becoming Muslims. According to this approach, Yezidis were given the term “Yazid”, by Muslims referring “apostates.” Today, many Muslims believe that Yezidis are apostate (mürted)¹. However, many modern Yezidis emphatically reject any connection between their religion and Islam (Langer, 2010: 393- 403). But it has to be said that Muslim’s view of Yezidis as apostates from the very beginning may drive from the similarities between Yezidi holy valley (Lalish) and Mecca. With regards to Yezidis, Mecca is not only holiest place of Islam but primarily an ancient cult (Rodziewicz, 2018a: 73). Therefore, there is near consensus among Muslims that the Yezidis as a group have left Islam.

In Arabic discourse, the term “Yezidi” or “Yazid” is associated with Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu’awiya, who linked to the murder of the prophet Mohammad’s grandson Hussein ibn ‘Ali. It is well known that on this account, many persecutions and massacres were committed against Yezidis in Muslim societies. For instance, the policy of the Arabisation of the Iraqi Ba’ath regime in the years 1965, 1973-75, 1986-89 displaced Yezidis from their villages to keep them away from Kurdish community. Their villages repopulated by the Arabs and they were declared as to be Arab descendants of the Ummayyad Caliph Yazid ibn Mu’awiya (Açıkyıldız, 2010: 60).

Some scholars using the term Yezidi might not be welcomed by Yezidies themselves at the present time. It should be mentioned that according to many Yezidis, in particular in Georgia, the concept Êzîdî is the original name of the community. Therefore, we clarify that the term “Yezidi” has been adopted in this study in accordance to common use among scholars in the academic field of social sciences.

With regards to religion, the concept of “Yezidism” is adopted to maintain the contemporary discourse concerning Yezidi studies. This concept refers to a syncretistic religion and Yezidi faith. However, according to Rodziewicz (2019) many Yezidis do not refer to their religion as “Yezidism” and instead use the word “Sharfadin” (Rodziewicz, 2019: 4). But, this term’s usage seems to be limited to some Yezidis in Transcaucasia. Yezidis from Iraq, Syria and Turkey use the concept of Yezidism.

Besides the concept of Yezidi and Yezidism, the terms fatwa, firman, and takfir are going to be used throughout the study. These terms belong to an Islamic administrative organization. As the theme of work focus on the relationships between Yezidis and the Ottoman Empire, the use of these terms is indeed compulsory.

¹ “Mahmud Bayazidi, a Kurdish mullah who was under the instructions of the Russian Consul in Erzerum, described a tribe of Yezidis as did not belong to Muslims in his report.” See more details (Asatrian-Arakelova, 2003).

Principally, it can be understood that the term fatwa (fetva in Turkish) is a religious degree, command that issued by a canonical law (müfti) (Bruinesen, 1992: 152). During the Ottomans' reign the legal consultation was carried out by chief mufti (şeyhülislam), qadi, and provincial muftis. In particular, in the 16th century, the muftis became active in political decision-making and legislative processes of sultan law (Yaycıoğlu, 1997: 23). As an honorific figure of the religious establishment, muftis were given significant duties. For instance, the mufti of the capital held the title of şeyhülislam (Agoston-Maters, 2009: 524). They were experts of religious law. A mufti can issue a fatwa while a Sultan can issue a firman as a political ruler. Whatever the Sultan ordered became a law. At this point, the term firman refers to governmental order (Ali, 2019: 78). However, in the Yezidis' discourse, this concept is used as ferman (in Kurdish), which refers to massacre, attack, and genocide. In the Yezidis' oral stories, the origins of many disasters are mentioned by fatwas and firmans. Thus the terms are used in the sense of massacre and attacks against Yezidis in work. The other word takfir is about labeling other Muslims as kafir (unbeliever), kefer (infidels), and legitimizing violation against them. It was introduced in the post-Quranic period (Kadivar, 2020: 3).

With regards to the methodology I focused on four main Ottoman archival documents that centered on Yezidis. Besides that, some textual materials of Muslim traveler Evliya Çelebi, who took part in the delegations in which sent to Yezidis by local governors of the Ottomans, have been taken into account. Moreover, a set of textual works of Western travelers and missionaries were analyzed by applying a content analysis method. Additionally, the contemporary researchers' observations and narratives were taken into consideration to create a descriptive work on the Ottomans' policies versus Yezidis. In particular, four significant Ottoman archival documents² that directly touch upon the issue were used in work to elaborate the scope of the policies toward Yezidis.

1) A brief passage on the Yezidis

The current state of knowledge regarding the sociopolitical circumstances of Yezidis, the scenarios on the origins of their religion, rituals and beliefs is derived mainly from the Islamic Arab school and Orientalist school. Thus, the currently available written materials on Yezidism have been largely produced by non-Yezidis.

As an "isolated"³ community in the Kurdish mountains of northern Iraq, they appeared in the twelfth century (Açıkyıldız, 2010: 1). Their cultural practices are mainly Kurdish and the orally transmitted religious traditions of Yezidism are Kurdish as well.⁴ "Their religious tradition was in a non-or semi- literate milieau until recently and as they have not a written Sacred Book, and they are not considered by Muslims as people of book" (Omarkhali, 2017: 14).

² Dahiliye Nezareti Mektubi Kalemi (hereafter DH.MKT)

Sadaret Mektubi Kalemi Belgeleri (hereafter A.MKT)

Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (hereafter BOA), Hatt-ı Hümayun (hereafter HAT)

Bâb-ı Asâfi Mühimme Defterleri (hereafter A.DVNSMHM.d)

³ External factors have isolated Yezidism. According to Gökçen (2012), the Islamist discourse of the heretic against Yezidis, the attempts of Islamization of Yezidis, and the activities of missionaries made Yezidism isolated in time. See (Gökçen, 2012:8)

⁴ <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/yazidis-i-general-1> , Accessed: 21/09/2021.

Estimates of their numbers in Iraq were between 100,000 and 250,000 in 2004; the largest Yezidi communities are currently found in the Dihok, Mosul and Sinjar areas of northern Iraq (Ackermann, 2004: 157). They also live in few villages of Turkey, Syria, and Iran. Today, Yezidis live in the Republic of Armenia, in Georgia as well as in Europe and United States of America as a diasporic group⁵.

The Yezidis have caught the attention of missionaries for centuries (Leezenberg, 2018: 236). The origins of Yezidis and their history were generally recorded by Western scholars, travelers, and Muslim Arab authors in the theme of the fantasy stories, exotic tales, and the discourse of the “devil worshipper,” or “godless clan” and so forth. Thus orientalist have been fascinated by these stories. Therefore, much has been written in a speculative way about their origins, their beliefs (Allison, 2001: 3). As Rodziewicz (2018b) highlights, for many years, the only written perception of the Yezidis was created by others (Rodziewicz, 2018a: 260).

a) Social dynamics of the community

Yezidis live in a confederation of tribes in their heartland. The tribes are dynamic units within society in the present. Individual Yezidi persons have her/his position in the society in relation to their tribe. The origins of the Yezidism are somewhat complex. According to many scholars (see I. Joseph, 1919, Ackerman, 2004, Arakelova, 2021, Bozan, 2012, Gülnihal, 2018 etc.) their religion is highly syncretistic one: Sufi influence can be seen in their religious vocabulary. Therefore many scholars see the Yezidism as a complex belief-system and “various theories have been put forward regarding the origin of the Yezidis, but the riddle may be regarded as still unsolved” (Heard, 1911: 201). For instance, according to Ackermann “Yezidism, as it is known today, developed out of a movement representing a mystical interpretation of Islam by the ‘Adawiyya order of Sheykh ‘Adi ibn Musafir (c.1073-1162 AD), which established itself in Kurdistan” (Ackermann, 2004: 158).

Yezidis believe in one God naming (Xwda/ê) Khuda, who is the creator of the universe and employ the title Peacock Angel. They use representation of the peacock as the emblem of their faith (Guest, 2010: 31). According to the Yezidi pantheon, God is not active and has delegated his power to seven angels (the Heptad of seven holy beings) who assist him. He appointed the Peacock Angel/*Tawûsî Melek*, to take care of worldly affairs and human fortune. God is interested only in heavenly affairs (Açıkyıldız, 2010: 71). For Yezidis, God is a kind of remote figure and through seven holy beings God can make contact with the divine. In Yezidi history, the holy beings⁶ have appeared in human forms in general as Sheikh Adi and his companions (Allison, 2017).

⁵ According to Açıkyıldız (2010) today the first big zone of the Yezidi population (estimated population is 518,000) is in Iraq. The second big zone of the Yezidi population (about 60,000 individuals) is in Transcaucasia and thier estimated number across the world is around 600,000-620,000. See (Açıkyıldız, 2010: 34).

⁶ According to Yezidis’ oral tradition there are different scenarios of the holy beings. Edmonds C.J. (1967) clasified the holy beings as follows:

1.Şeyh Adi, 2.Melek Tawus,3.Şeyh Şemseddin, 4. Şeyh Fahreddin, 5. Şeyh Sicaddin, 6.Şeyh Nasreddin, 7. Şeyh Hasan

<https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-254>

Accessed: 13/09/2021.

In Yezidism, the transmission of basic religious knowledge is based on oral tradition. It was transmitted by means of oral teachings and sacred texts that were rarely or never committed to writing (Kreyenbroek, 2009: 17). Myths, folk legends and hymns are memorised by the men of religion or qewwals/kawals, who have transmitted from generation to generation since time immemorial (Açıkyıldız, 2010: 35). It has to be said that the transmission of religious knowledge is in the hands of individual Sheikhs and Pîrs, whilst the qewwals contribute to it with their “sermons” (Omarkhali-Kreyenbroek, 2016: 199).

“Yezidi-Kurdish society is strictly governed by a nonhierarchical caste system, divided into two spiritual castes (Pir and Sheikh) and one mass caste (Murid)” (Szakonyi, 2007: 3) and “all Yezidis belong to one of the hereditary and endogamous castes of Sheikhs, Pir, or Mirids. Members of these castes may further belong to the groups of Qewwals, Feqirs, or Kocheks” (Kreyenbroek -Rashow, 2005: 6). But when the endogamous nature of the spiritual castes is taken into consideration, it can be argued that Yezidi society is nonhierarchical. Anyway, the community is led by the Mîr of Sheikhan, who is traditionally regarded as the earthly viceregent of Sheykh Adi, and also of Melek Tawus, and his person is felt to be sacred (Ackermann, 2004: 159). Thus, the power of Mîr is unlimited relatively and the membership in the community is determined by birth only.

2) The Ottomans and Yezidis

The bad reputation of Yezidis within mainstream Sunni Islam probably began with the expansion of the Ottoman empire in Iraq during the 1500's. As a hatred group by their neighbors, Yezidis avoided contact with Muslims whenever possible (Agostan-Masters, 2009: 602). They isolated themselves in time from such policies of Islamization and activities of missionaries (Gökçen, 2012: 8).

Even though some scholars claim that there was no such antagonistic between the Ottomans and Yezidis during 16th and 18th centuries, it can be said that there was a kind of relationship that evolved from public order crime into sectarian issues smoothly. Of course, in the classical period of the Ottomans, the relationships between the state and Yezidis were in general about law and order and the obedience of Yezidis to the Sultan and local rulers (Qadi, Beglerbeyi, etc.). In many archival documents of the 16th century (*Mühimme Defterleri*), there is no strict pressure on Yezidis coming from the central government. But, once the whole archival documents are analyzed one can encounter the idea of “*mezheb-i resmîye*,” which was an official policy of the Ottomans based on irrecognition of the Yezidis (Gökçen, 2012: 16). They had been described to the Sultan as unbelievers and troublemakers by local rulers and by fatwas of religious leaders. They were considered in the official discourse as an irreligious (zendeka) group⁷.

Under the Ottomans' rule, they officially encountered the state apparatus for the first time in 1556 due to not paying taxes called *tekalîf-i mîrî* (Akman, 2021: 110-138). According to many scholars (see Ocak, 2017, Akman, 2021, Gülsoy, 2002) throughout the 16th century, the policies of the Ottomans versus Yezidis and other non-Muslim groups was not based on enmity, rather based on the level of the heretic's obedience to the Sultan. The more paid obedience to

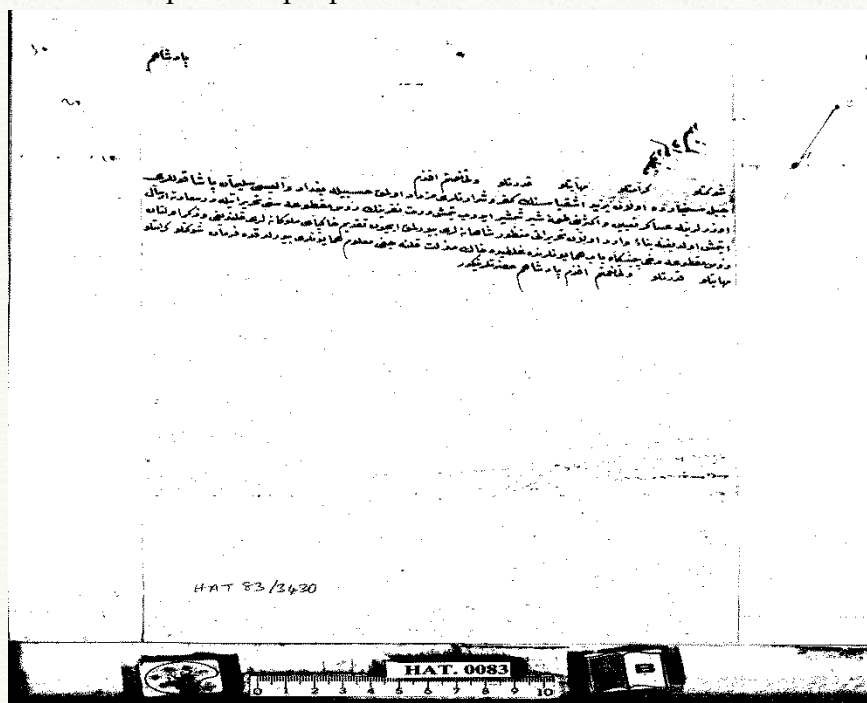
⁷ BOA, Bâb-1 Asâfî Mühimme Defterleri (A.DVNSMHM.d.No. 49), <https://katalog.devletarsivleri.gov.tr/>

the state apparatus, the more privilege they received. But that rhetoric also contained its own enmity. Even though a letter of complaint from the qadi of the Imadiye (Amediye)' Sultan Hüseyin dated 1568⁸ which claimed that Yezidi group settled around Diyarbebir and Mosul were torturing farmers and looting villages did not yet contain a hateful discourse against Yezidis. But soon after, in 1574, Yezidi faith was described in letters to Sultan as follows:

...Dasni taifesi Yezidi olup ümeraya ve şer'i şerife itaat eylemeyüp... mezhepsiz ve milletten hariç kat'a ezan ve namaz olmayıp haklarından acilen gelinmelidir.

*...Dasni Yezidis defy orders and do not abide by Islamic law (Sharia)...they are unbelievers and do not worship in the way that millet (Muslims) do. It is necessary to defeat them urgently...*⁹

Therefore, there is no sense in the claim that the Ottomans had no hostility against Yezidis during the 16th century. Both Yezidis located in Diyarbekir and Urfa and Laleş (Lalish) suffered oppression at the hands of the Ottomans' administration (Gökçen, 2012: 10). As seen in the above-named archival documents, the discourse of the Ottoman rulers around Yezidi districts changed into aggressive rhetoric within just six years. Briefly, when Yezidis did not abide by sharia or public order, local rulers could easily assert their faith. This approach against Yezidis can be considered a kind of enmity. It is probably, because of that rhetoric that the Sultan's policies towards Yezidis evolved into more forceful acts in the 18th and 19th centuries. For instance, in another archival document¹⁰ dated 1795, the Ottoman sultan was informed by the governor of Baghdad that seventy-four Yezidi "robber/bandit" were beheaded. The governor of Baghdad sent the cut-off heads of those Yezidis to Istanbul to be exhibited at entrance of the Imperial Topkapı Palace:



⁸ A.DVNSMHM.d. 706/7, <https://katalog.devletarsivleri.gov.tr/>

⁹ A.DVNSMHM.d. No 26/193, <https://katalog.devletarsivleri.gov.tr/>

¹⁰ BOA, HAT, 83, 3430, 1209

As time went by, in particular during 18th and 19th centuries, Yezidis started up to encounter the conversion and the conscription policies of the Ottomans.

Therefore, two main causes may be associated with the Ottoman empire likely gave directions to the fate of the modern Yezidi society. First, there was the need for a set of policies to strengthen the tax system and collect taxes from Kurdish tribes during 1600s. Second, there was an urgent need for the modern army to keep its power stable against five dominant powers (Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary empire, and German empire) from the 1800s onwards. The second cause brought the Yezidis into the Ottomans' rulers conversion policies and led to aggressive policies of conscription. In the 1830s and 1840s, therefore, many Yezidis left their district because of persecution, and many left to escape continuing oppression by Muslims (Bruinesen, 1992: 24). Such persecutions reduced their numbers and drove waves of emigrants into the Caucasus, where they played a notable in the republics of Armenia and Georgia and where they currently number around 40,000 (Kokot-Tölölyan-Alfonso et, al., 2004: 158).

During Hamidian regime (1876-1909), ethnicity became a more important conception in the relationship between the Ottomans and minorities. According to Karpas: "There were stirrings of ethnicity also among smaller, more marginal communities. Thus the Yezidis in the vilayet of Mosul, numbering altogether about 68,000, agreed to register in the sicil-i nufus (population registers) if their identity as 'Yezidis' was mentioned specifically on their identity cards (tezakir-i Osmaniye)...the Ottoman government agreeing to recognize identity in order to prevent missionaries¹¹ from converting them to Christianity" (Karpas, 2001: 325).

But it should be stressed that at the same time, the Ottoman government was calling Yezidis a Muslim group ironically. The Ottomans and their local Kurdish emirs were using force (the central government was using force in Lalish, at the same time Kurdish emirs were using force in Diyarbakir, Mardin and Mosul) frequently to convert them to Islam by appealing to *tekfir*¹² policy.

¹¹ During Hamidian regime, the Ottoman rule was weak in Iraq. The central government was afraid of the activities of the Christian missionaries among Yezidis in Iraq. Thus a plan of turning the "deviant" groups to Islam was carried out at once by the central government. For instance, according to two archival documents dated 1909 (MF. MKT Dosya no: 1136, Gömlek sıra no:38) and dated 1897 (BEO, Dosya no: 382, Gömlek no:28633), the Ottoman rulers of Viranşehir and Mardin asked for the necessity of opening primary education schools (iptidaiye mektepleri) to prevent the activities of the American Protestant missionaries for the converting Yezidis to Christianity: "*Makam-ı acizinin 21 Haziran sene 325 tarihli teskiresine zeyldir bir vakfa aid olmayarak müceddeden vücuda getirilecek(...) sâire için maârif bütçesine bin lira idhal edildiği anlaşıldığına ve Viranşehir'de Amerika misyonierlerinin ahâli-i mahalliyeden Yezidi olanları Protestan yapmak maksadıyla icra ettirilen etmekten hâli kalmadıkları telkinât ve tesvilâta karşı ahâli-i merkume etfaline aka'id-i diniye ve adab-ı İslamiyenin ta'lim ve telkini zımında orada irşâ mektebin bir an evvel te'sis ve küşâdî ehem ve elzem bulunmasına iktizasının seri'en ifa ve inbası menut-ı himem-i aliyeyi nezâret-penâhîlerid ol babda irade efendim hazretler (...)*"

"...American Protestant missionaries make efforts to convert Yezidis living around Viranşehir to Protestantism. It is urgently needed to open the schools of the right path (presumably, primary schools) in order to prevent missionaries and to teach forms of Islam to the Yezidis..."see more details (Gökçen, 2012: 318)

¹² The term is described as "to criminate someone as heretic." by Ferit Develioğlu in his work Ottoman-Turkish Dictionary; see. (Develioğlu, 2008: 1066)

“Historically, the Yezidi community has remained secluded, essentially for religious reasons” (Savelsberg-Hajo-Dulz, 2010: 103). And they faced waves of violence that came from Arabs, Turks, and Muslim Kurdish emirs and tribes in the context of Islamization policies in Kurdistan. During the Islamic reign of the Caliphates, there were many semi-independent Kurdish emirates in the region (Ali, 2019: 80). From the period of the social struggles between the Sasanian Empire and Arab armies to the end of the Ottoman empire, many Kurdish local rulers occasionally developed ambiguous relationships with central governments to maintain their autonomy as rulers of their lands. For instance, the beg of Bitlis, Emir Şerif, who had a prominent position in his region, welcomed Shah Ismail during the conquest of eastern Anatolia. After a while, he was arrested by Shah and a Qizilbash commander appointed to rule Bitlis. The Shah did not release Şeref Beg and Melik Halil of Hisnkeyfa due to their prominent position in Kurdistan (Atmaca, 2021: 45). Thus, from time to time, Kurdish principalities used the social and political circumstances to maintain their autonomy in Kurdistan. Beyond any doubt, the domination of Qizilbash weakened the authority of the Kurdish principalities. “Therefore, just before the Ottomans arrived in Kurdistan, the Kurdish lords of Bitlis, Mardin, Çemişgezek, Egil, Hazzo (Hizo) and other centers revolted against this Qizilbash domination” (Atmaca, 2021: 46). Kurdish begs and mîrs tried to make good relationships with strong rulers by a kind of diplomacy to maintain their political existence and protected their lands from attacks by Ottomans and Safavids. The Kurdish Yezidi Mahmudî dynasty is a good example of the diplomatic efforts used to keep the domination of their lands around the city of Van. They made political manoeuvres in regard to political cycles. On one hand, some of them backed¹³ the central government of the Ottomans to reclaim their lost territories, on the other hand, the other begs who distrusted the Ottomans backed Safavids to deal with internal threats (the intra-Kurdish rivalries persuaded by Ottomans that weakened begs’ ability to rule Kurdistan lands) and external threats (Shiites or Safavids threats to the autonomy of begs in Kurdistan).

In the meantime, many local Kurdish chiefs were given formal recognition by central governments, in particular by Islamic armies, when tribes were not in a situation of rebellion against central governments and fighting with caliphal armies. At the same time, many Kurdish chiefs submitted to the Arab armies and to the new Islamic religion (McDowall, 2004: 22).

With regards to Yezidi tribes, they were seen as “defiant” of Islam or “devil worshippers” by both the Ottoman Empire and some Kurdish Muslim tribes that achieved functional independence. Even today, this hateful discourse persists among some Kurdish Muslim tribes.

In one of the earliest chronicles of Kurdish history, Sharafnama, which was written by Kurdish Muslim prince Sharaf-Khan Batlisi, one can see the roots of that hateful approach. Yezidis’ religion were characterized in some fatwas as the “defiant” of Islam and “fake.” In the

Many Muslim scholars such as Ebü’l Kasım el Büstî and Bağdadî have consensus that any Islamic reign should adopt a tekfir policy against Yezidis. See; <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/tekfir>. Accessed: 10/06/2021.

Many Muslims believe that Yezidis are originally Muslim and they must be converted to Islam again. Though, Yezidis are seen as heretic (*kafir*), apostate (*murted*) group by Islamic discourse.

¹³ “İdris-i Bidlisi who worked for Safavids as a bureaucrat decided to collaborate with Sultan Selim I to stop the Anatolian expansion of Shah Ismail and to defeat Safavids. İdris-i Bidlisi started his diplomacy among the Kurds who were still under the influence of the Safavids to persuade them to side with Sultan Selim I” see more details (Atmaca, 2021: 48)

Sharaf-Khan's work, some of the Yezidi emirs such as Tasnî, Xaldî, Besyanî, Dinbilî were described as in rebellion against the central government and, of course, against Islam (Han, 1971, I/21-22).

From the 16th century onwards, Yezidis became a recurring issue in a wide regional landscape. After establishing the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith¹⁴ by Pope Gregory XV, some Christian missionaries made contact with the Christian communities of Kurdistan governed by the Ottomans. Several empirical details concerning the appearances of Yezidis are recorded in the notes taken by missionaries,¹⁵ Muslim travelers such as Evliya Çelebi. Some local Muslim imams and muftis who lead Muslim worshippers in prayer, such as Abû al S'ud al-'Amadî al-Kurdî (1492-1573), Mela Salih el-Kurdî el-Hakkârî, and Ibn-i Nuh,¹⁶ illustrated Yezidis in the way of a hateful discourse in their fatwas and textual works. Nevertheless, some Yezidi Kurdish emirates and dynasties were included in the Ottoman administrative structure until the beginning of 17th century. For instance, according to Guest(2010), when Syria was invaded by Sultan Selim in 1516, Qasim Beg, a chief of the Kurds west of Aleppo, paid homage to the sultan in order to prevent Egyptians' efforts to install a Yezidi in his place (Guest, 2010: 47). Likewise, the Mahmudî dynasty, which controlled Khoshab and surrounding areas for almost five centuries (from 14th century to 19th century), converted to Sunni Islam and allied with the Ottomans around 1550 (Açıkyıldız, 2016: 369-383).

The Ottomans desired to gain the loyalty of Yezidis just as the other Islamic caliphates had desired before them. Some Yezidi emirates were supported against some Kurdish groups by the Ottomans (Sheikh Izzeddin against Canpolats). However, from the beginning of the 16th century to the end of the 19th century, in general, Yezidis were exposed to an aggressive policy by using force and the stick and carrot approaches by the Ottomans.

It has to be said that the relation between Yezidis and the Ottoman administrations (c.1516-1918) is known little (Fuccaro, 1997: 566). At least one can share Fuccaro's argument for the classical period of the Ottomans. But, as of 16th century, it can be claimed that the relationship of both sides shaped into the context of the use of force policy to oblige the community to subdue. It is clear that there was nothing in common between the Ottomans and the Êzîdîs(Yezidis), whether religiously and ethnically (Salloum, 2016: 71). Nonetheless, Yezidis were labeled as Muslims and misrecognized as a particular belief by the Ottomans.

¹⁴ This institution is also known as "Propaganda Fide"

¹⁵ See Guest (2010) to have more details about Catholic missionary work in the Near East.

¹⁶ The Mufti of the Ottoman Empire Abû al S'ud Al Amadî was issuing fatwas in 1550's to legitimize the Ottoman Sultan's killings of Yezidis. See "Genocidal Campaigns during the Ottoman Era...", (Ali, 2019). Likewise, Mala Salih el-Kurdî el-Hakkârî, who was a high Islamic mufti of Kurdistan in 16th century, was issuing fatwas to reject the Yezidi faith. According to a part of his fatwa, "Yezidis deny Koran and Religious Law and believe absurd statements such as Fakhr al-Din." To him Yezidis express enmity to Islam. See (Bozan, 2020), "XVI. Asırda Yezidiler'in dini statüsü hakkındaki tartışmalara dair iki belge: Mevlana Salih El-Kurdî'nin bir Fetvası ile Mevlana Muhammed Berkâlî'nin Ta'liki" and Dehqan, M. (2008) "The Fatwa of Mala Salih el-Kurdî el-Hakkârî: A Arabic Manuscript on The Yezidi Religion"

Ibn-i Nuh was a local imam of the city Van, who wrote the history of the city in 1700s and gave the details about Yezidi population of Van and their relationships with the Ottomans. According to his account, Yezidis were the army of devil (Cünd-i Şeytan) that controlling the territories of Islam and Muslims. He gives details of the battles between the Ottomans and Yezidis in Van. Ibn-i Nuh, Van Tarihi, (Ed. Tekin, Z., 2003: 87).

The Yezidi tribes were dominating several parts of Kurdistan by controlling commerce in their districts, even during the times of Ottoman domination. They were dominating the main routes of commerce in the city of Van (Mahmudî and Dunbeli dynasties), some part of the city Mardin, in Sinjar, Mosul, and some part of Baghdad. Even some Yezidi leaders occupied important positions in the Ottoman provincial system (Tezcür, 2021: 106). That is, Kurdistan was ruled indirectly by the Ottomans until the end of the first quarter of the 19th century. As Guest (2010) illustrates, the relationships between Yezidis and the Ottomans were shaped in the framework of mutual profit for a while. For instance, during the reign of Murad IV, some Yezidi tribes backed the Ottomans to recapture Baghdad from Persian troops. Dasani contingent led by Mirza Beg backed the Ottomans and was appointed as governor of Mosul by the grand vizier Kara Murad Pasha after sultan Murad's death. After replacing grand vizier Kara Murad Pasha, Mirza Beg went to Istanbul to seek a new appointment. He was intercepted and executed by the new grand vizier Melek Ahmed Pasha¹⁷ (Guest, 2010: 48). When Melek Ahmed Pasha was appointed as the governor of Van, he probably aimed to strengthen the failing central tax system by collecting arrears of taxes from Diyarbekir and other parts of Kurdistan. The decline of tax income received his attention when he became the grand vizier.¹⁸ Several delegations had been sent to Diyarbekir to recover a large sum of money from the governor there, Firari Mustafa Pasha, which was owed to Melek Ahmed Pasha. Firari Mustafa Pasha was out campaigning against Yezidi tribes in the Sinjar mountains. Evliya Çelebi witnessed punitive campaigns of the Pasha against the Yezidis, who refused to pay taxes (Bruinessen-Boeschoten, 1988: 107). Such campaigns and expeditions were held both by Kurdish princes and Arab tribes that employed by the Ottomans to protect "robbing" caravans from Yezidis during the 19th century.¹⁹ According to Guiseppe Campalino, who was the earliest European that reached Kurdistan and make contact with Yezidis, spoke of the main income of Yezidis coming from "robbery of caravans."²⁰ We know that there were many campaigns against Yezidis during the nineteenth century. However, according to Guest (2010), only two Ottoman expeditions to the Sinjar are recorded in the early years of the nineteenth century (Guest, 2010: 63). But many expeditions were held in particular after the 1830s. The governor of Sivas, Hafız Mehmed Pasha, attempted to consolidate the Ottoman rule over Kurdish tribes and Sinjari Yezidis in 1837. It was the starting point of expeditions. Before this attempt, there were some military campaigns of the government under the leadership of Reşid Pasha²¹ against powerful Kurdish tribes. Most of Yezidis were massacred during the battles between the well-equipped Ottoman army and powerful Kurdish tribes (Gölbaşı, 2008: 43). Some powerful Kurdish tribes were

¹⁷ Melek Ahmed Pasha married a daughter of sultan Murad IV and he was Evliya Çelebi's relative and protector.

¹⁸ It is to be said that "the two fundamental classical Ottoman Empire were the *salve* and *timar* systems. They defined state's military and political order, taxation system and forms of land tenure, determining its whole social and political structure. Towards the end of the sixteen century these institutions began to deteriorate rapidly." The empire's decline was based on the deterioration of these institutions. See more details; (Inalcik, 2013).

¹⁹ Tai Arabs, located to around Sinjar Yezidis, employed by the Ottomans to protect merchants. See more details, Guest (2010).

²⁰ https://www.institutkurde.org/publications/etude_kurdes/Campalino.php, Accessed: 03/04/2021

²¹ He was grand vizier during 1830s and had desire to regain Syria and to take control of Anatolia after Mehmet Ali's defeating of the Ottomans. The power of many Kurds of central Anatolia reduced during that time.

forced to join Ottomans, such as Bedirhan Beg and his tribe. Before the Ottomans, such Kurdish tribes assaulted the Yezidis. Mir Muhammed of Rewanduz was one of them.

During the regimen of Reshid Pasha and his successor Hafız Pasha, many Kurds were conscripted to the Ottoman army. Not having a modernized army created a need for a conscription policy to prepare armies for battles in Syria and Iraq, to prevent Russia's expansion, and to maintain the Empire's power stable in the region. Furthermore, as of the 1830s, British influence in the Ottoman empire was obvious. Many state administrations were improved with the help of British authorities to prevent Russian influence. As a result of that relationship between British authorities and the Ottomans, many non-Muslim communities were tolerated. But the Yezidis were an exception to this. Yezidis' status became unclear. Thus, many conflicts between the Ottomans and Yezidis were shaped within the framework of an unclear status (with regards to religion and tax payment) and questions of their liability to military service. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Yezidis' "bad-tempered" approaches toward the Ottoman authorities were reported by Eduard Sachau (Sachau, 1883: 330-33)²² who was an orientalist and traveled to Sinjar in the 1880s. Sachau provided details of the population of every province he visited, and categorized the province in terms of religion, language, and sects (Avci, 2020: 36).

Sultan Abdul Hamid (1876-1909) was aware of "self-ordained" Kurds. His first aim was to re-organize an Ottoman army to prepare a conscription law to deal with the untapped resources of the empire and to gain strong manpower to prevent the loss of territories of the empire and maintain the internal authority.

Of course the Ottoman authorities were using force against Yezidis through their *takfir* policy. This and other policies were shaped within the context of imperial anxieties. The first aim of the early campaigns was to collect taxes and subdue Yezidi tribes with the help of strict Muslim Kurdish emirs. The second aim of the late campaigns of the nineteenth century was to impose the idea of Islamization within the context of "Panislamism," which was used as defense policy to integrate Arabs into the Ottoman system to deal with nationalist ideologies. The anti-Yezidis religious *fatwas*, and *firman*s of the Ottomans were central to this policy. The aim of the Turkish army in the Yezidi districts can be seen clearly in the records of the priest E.G. Browne during 1890s. E.G. Browne mentions a set of the aims of Sublime Porte: first to collect twenty years' arrears of taxes; second to convert the Yezidis to Islam (Parry, 1895: 253). The Ottomans pursued *takfir* policy because of two main reasons:

The conscription on the agenda of the local Ottoman rulers

"Military service as an obligation for the subject of the Ottoman Empire, was introduced for the first time in the late 1840s" (Gölbaşı, 2008: 53). Yezidis were not recognized as a separate religious group by the Ottomans. Although Zoroastrians, who received sacred texts from God like Christians and Jews, were seen as *ahl al-kitab* (people of book), Yezidis were not categorized as *ahl al-kitab*. They were rather categorized as heretics. Therefore, all the members of the Yezidi community under Ottoman rule were liable to military service, as they were not recognized as *ahl al-kitab*. The *ahl al-kitab* communities (Christians, Jews) were, in

²² <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044022684815&view=1up&seq=400>,

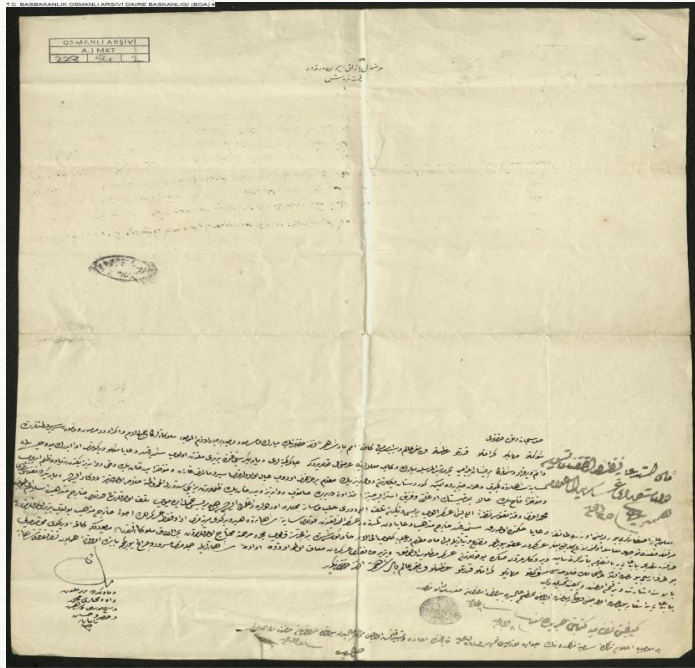
Accessed: 27/04/2021

fact, the only Ottoman subjects exempted from military service²³, provided that they paid a tax *cizye*²⁴ to the Ottoman government (Fuccaro, 1997: 566). These exempted groups were accepted as equal citizens with the “Reform Edict of Gülhane”. In particular the reform edict (Islahat Fermanı) emphasized equality between Muslims and non-Muslims (Zürcher, 1998: 446). But Yezidis were placed on the same regulations of conscription as Muslims had been. For sure some Muslim Kurds went to war under their own emirs. But as Gölbaşı (2013) stresses, for Hamidian rulers and religious scholars, Yezidis were a “heretic” group, and Ottoman political elites tried to conscript Yezidis to fulfill their military service together with Muslims in the regular army in order to convert them to Islam smoothly (Gölbaşı, 2013: 5). Christians were routinely described as “infields,” yet they were tolerated; others such as Yezidi Kurds and Druzes were often described as “heretics.” In Evliya Çelebi’s works Yezidis are described as “heretics” and “dog worshippers (Çelebi, vol.4, Makdisi, 2002: 773). Moreover, Çelebi described Yezidis of Sinjar mountain as a “bandit” group that tortured local farmers and looted merchants (Çelebi, 1978-86: 467). According to Evliya Çelebi, Yezidis located in Sinjar Mountain (Saçlı Dağı) needed to be destroyed and perished. He described Yezidis as “infidel clan” or “Satan clan” during the military expedition of Melek Ahmed Paşa of Saçlı Dağı (Sinjar Mountain) (Çelebi, 1978-86: IV, 2).

When the Ottoman state attempted to conscript some of the Yezidi men in the late 1840s, the community began to look for ways to escape from it. They did not expect to be recruited to the army because they regarded themselves as a non-Muslim sect (*harici-i mezheb*) (Gölbaşı, 2008: 12). However, in related Ottoman archival documents; it is mentioned as follows:

²³ It is to be said that any Muslim man could buy exemption. “The first conscription law of 1848 allowed conscripts to send a personal replacement (*bedel-i şahsî*)” see more details (Zürcher, 1998: 445)

²⁴ The term *cizye* basically refers to the concept of *tax* which was paid for land and commutation. During the Ottoman rule, non-Muslim subjects were supposed to pay *cizye* with regard to get protection that provided by the Muslim rulers. The term *cizye* refers to commutation tax while the term *haraç* refers to land tax. (<https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/cizye#2-osmanlilarda-cizye>, (Encyclopedia of Islam). Until the second half of the 19th century the *cizye* was considered as capitation tax, Fuccaro (1997). However, in 1856 the tax practice *cizye* replaced by the commutation tax (*bedel-i askerî*). The central government carried *bedel-i askerî* into effect for the exemption of non-Muslim subjects for army service till the year 1907. See more details; (Inalcik, 2013).



*"...55 Yezidis had been conscripted from the province Diyarbekir to the province of Aleppo. One of the members of these group died on the way and the rest of them could not endure and they perished..."*²⁵

The dead of the member of communities during army service is illustrated in this document by the word perish (*telef olmak* in Turkish). After the recruitment of the community members, Yezidis tried to find ways to avoid army service by hiding, migrating, resisting, and so on. From the 1840s to 1870, Yezidis tried to solve the issue of conscription by negotiating with the central government and sending leaders to Istanbul to obtain documents or receive a guarantee to be exempt from military service. However, their efforts regarding exemption from military service remained inconclusive. In 1873 an imperial irade (order) was issued requiring Yezidis to undergo military service. The Yezidis thereupon petitioned the Sultan, praying that they should be excused for the following a set of reasons:

"a) every Yezidi must behold the image of Malik-i Tawûs and visit the shrine of Sheikh Adi once a year, b) it is a sin for a Yezidi to hear the prayers of the Muslims, c) when a Yezidi dies there should be present at his burial a Sheikh, Pir, Qawal who shall witness to this man who dies in the Yezidi religion, d) when a Yezidi is absent from his wife for one year, his wife has the right to desert him, and no other woman will marry him, e) it is forbidden to the Yezidis to eat certain foods, such as are commonly consumed by the troops" (Heard, 1911: 212).

During the 19th century, many Western scholars considered this petition as a written religious text. We learn from this petition that the spiritual heritage of the Yezidis' religion was the main reason behind the refusal position to serve in the Ottoman army. In addition to this, another reason behind the Ottoman refusal of the petition appeared among Yezidi's so-called collective consciousness in the light of the pan-Islamic policies of Sultan Abdul Hamid. With resistance to recruitment, Yezidis could gain social and collective consciousness. They were aware of the results of enrolling in the army. In case of enrolling in the army, they might lose

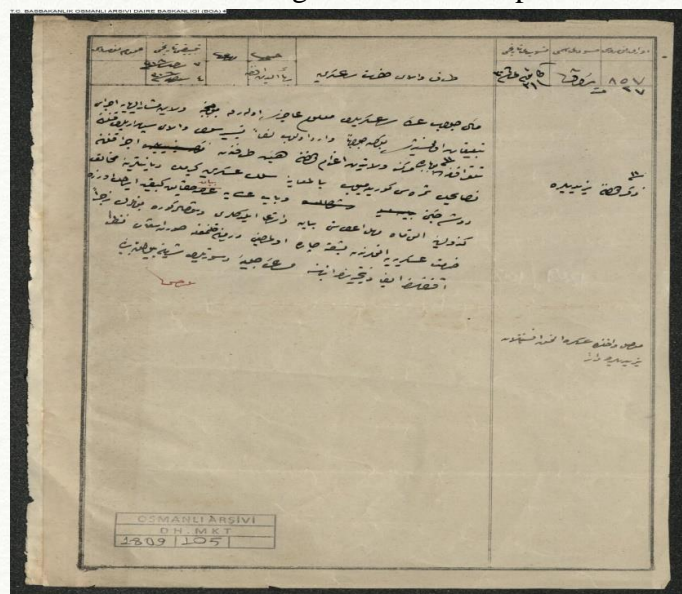
²⁵ BOA, A.MKT /228/54

their links with their families and tribes. These links were important concerning spiritual heritage. Moreover, from the point of both Arabs and Yezidis there were socio-political reasons beyond refusing to serve in army. The Ottoman's regular procedure of conscription was not always followed in Kurdistan, Yemen or Iraq where feudal relationships were strong (Zürcher, 1998: 437-449).

a) The conversion policy

"At the end of the 19th century, the issue of Yezidi conscription became increasingly linked to attempts to Islamicize the community as part of the pan-Islamic²⁶ policy of sultan Abdul Hamid" (Fuccaro, 1997: 567). The Hamidian regime believed that Yezidis would integrate by conversion. Thus ethnic-national fervor reached a peak during Abdulhamid's reign both despite and because of Ottomanism- Islamism (Karpas, 2001: 325) and the conscription issue of Yezidis combined with converting to Islam (Gölbaşı, 2008: 81).

The efforts of the Sultan appeared to melt Yezidis into a post-Muslim Ottoman unity. This policy was on the agenda of the Sultan not only for Yezidis but also for the other Ottoman subjects such as Shi'i Zaidis, the Ottoman Nausiris, and other. "The government tried to bring the Yezidis into the fold of orthodox Islam by opening mosques and schools in their villages and towns and by sending there Sunni ulema and teachers" (Karpas, 2001: 205). For this purpose, a commission was sent to the Yezidi's territories to persuade them that they had originally been Muslim. The commission "Heyet-i Tefhimiyeye" tried to convert the Yezidi Sheikhs to Islam, but the commission failed its duty then a report was sent to the central government mentioned using force to conscript Yezidis to army service:



"...The commission's duty of persuading Yezidis has failed. They need to be conscripted to the army service by using force..."²⁷

²⁶ "It was an ideology (pan-Islamism) that was accepted by Turkish intellectuals calling for solidarity among all Muslims to save the Ottoman Empire from fragmentation. It was adopted by Sultan Abdulhamid. " See more details <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1819>

²⁷ BOA, Dahiliye Nezareti Mektubi Kalemi (DH.MKT). 1809/105

Yezidis were informed by the Ottoman authorities that if they embraced Islam, the sultan might be disposed to find a way to exempt them from military service for the present. In case of keeping their religion, they would be imprisoned. In response, Yezidis turned to American missionaries that operated since 1871 in Urmia for help. The missionaries asked the Yezidis to join the Protestant church in order to get help (Guest, 2010: 133). Yezidis were between a rock and a hard place. There was no option to avoid conversion attempts of the Ottomans and the converting performance of the Christian missionaries.

At the end of the nineteenth century, pan-Islamism became the main instrument of the Ottoman government's centralization policies in the Yezidi areas of northern Iraq. The government wanted to solve the Yezidi issue as soon as possible. In 1892, the Ottoman General 'Umar Wahbi Pasha' commander of a reforming force sent from Istanbul to crush the tribal rebellion in the province Shaikhan. "A detachment of soldiers was sent to kill everyone in a prominent Yezidi chief's village and bring back their heads to the city of Mosul." (Guest, 2010: 135). The Ottoman government succeeded in converting Yezidi religious leaders, such as Mir Mirza Beg, to Islam. The government started to influence the election of the supreme religious leaders (mîr) of the community and opposing fictions occurred within mir's household. Sa'id Beg became the Mir of Yezidis under Ottoman protection. The mir was granted the title of pasha (Fuccaro 1999). The "Jabal Sinjar" started taking shape under the Ottoman government's religious policies on Mir's statue in northern Iraq in the 1890s. However, some Yezidi villages located in Jebel Selmán hills west of Aleppo and Sheikhan could protect their culture and identity.

Conclusion

The Ottomans' early conversion campaigns were based on the discourse of Muslim Kurdish chiefs, emirs, and tribes that had power in Kurdistan and the eastern provinces of the empire. Their discourse about Yezidis consisted concepts like "heretic," "devil-worshippers," and "bandit." The Ottomans' local rulers adopted that discourse as well. The Ottomans' early aim was to maintain their power in Kurdistan and the eastern provinces by cooperating with Kurdish emirs from the 16th century to the 17th century. During that time, the Ottomans cooperated with some Yezidi groups against Kurdish begs as well. Therefore, the initial encounters of the Ottomans and Yezidis around Diyarbakir, Mardin, Van can not be categorized entirely as enmity. However, the conversion of Yezidis to Islam was on the agenda of the local Ottoman rulers, local religious leaders (imams), and Kurdish emirs backing the Ottomans until the first conscription law of 1848. Thus central government gave room to Muslim Kurdish tribes to deal with Yezidis until the need of the modern regulations of army service. When the Ottomans suffered from a corrupted timar and tax system, its policies against Yezidis shifted to tax collection. To deal with the relatively low income of taxes from Kurdistan, the Ottomans focused on using force against Yezidis. At the same time, the need for a regular army appeared in the context of the 19th century. In particular, Yezidis faced aggressive and destructive policies starting from the end of the 18th century. In broad terms, we can say that the hateful discourse of some religious authorities merged into a state policy during the 19th century. To establish a state-centralization and deploy the "pan-Islamist" policies, powerful commanders led many campaigns against Yezidis on behalf of the central government. The violent character

of the policies against non-Muslim communities was maintained on the agenda of the powerful remnants of the Ottoman empire.

Moreover, the destructive violence against Yezidis was because of the persistent policy (irrecognition of the Yezidis as a non-Muslim group) of the central government of the Ottomans. The roots of that policy most probably derived from the earlier discourse of the local religious leaders, tribal leaders, and Muslim Kurdish emirs.

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