

SOCIAL TRUST; A CONFUSION BETWEEN LOST AND WON
A COMPARATIVE ENCOUNTER WITH SOCIAL TRUST AMONG THE YEZIDIS OF
ARMENIA AND NORTH IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

The notion of trust is sparkling at the heart of social capital. Simply a two-word concept, social trust has proven to be an intriguing concept, one which has captured the interest and imagination of scholars, researchers, and professionals alike. The study of social trust among ethnic minorities is especially the object of current public concern. Although much ink has been spilled by researchers to dissect the state of social trust in burgeoning democracies, direct study of this concept is lacking among Yezidi communities.

In an attempt to address this imbalance, therefore, the overriding concern of this paper has been to examine the state of social trust among two geographically different communities of the Yezidis; the Yezidis of Armenia and the Yezidi community of north Iraq. Therefore, the main question addressed in this paper is how much diversity in the level of trust may exist between these two communities. Along with shedding light on this question, the paper suggests feasible procedures, that if taken, the deficit of trust in some Yezidi-populated areas may be promoted.

Keywords: Trust, Social Capital, Yezidi Communities, Ethno-Religious Minorities, Armenia, North Iraq

Introduction:

"Trustis never to be taken for granted...In our relation to the world, trust is always in conflict with mistrust...yet if we are dominated by mistrust, we cannot attend or interpret adequately, we cannot act accountably, and we will rupture, not strengthen, the solidarity of the community or communities we live in".¹

The theme of trust is not very heart-warming and promising, rather it may seem dismal when it comes to write about minority communities. It is an intriguing paradox of our era that while more and more states have embraced democratic forms and styles of governance, there is decreasing trust among most of the ethno-religious communities of the Middle East. The great enthusiasm attached to the study of the Yezidis is defused by the notion that they are as often as not suffering from the deficit of social trust within their communities. Having this in mind that the trust fabric of the Yezidi-populated areas is as colorful as their symbolic "the Peacock", this paper deals with diversity within two Yezidi communities: the Yezidis of Armenia and the Yezidi community of north Iraq.

Sociologically speaking, trust has proven to be a mean for building and maintaining social relationships. The literature agrees that trust is an important variable affecting human relations at all levels: relationship between governments, between minorities and majorities, between parents and children, and so on.²

Fukuyama argues that a common ethnicity may facilitate trust and exchange among members of the same ethnic group; however, it might inhibit exchange between members of different groups.³ In the same vein, Leigh connects ethnic diversity to lower levels of trust. In his view, therefore, this could happen because those in homogeneous communalities have similar tastes, because members of the majority group have an aversion to heterogeneity, or because diverse communities find it more difficult to enforce a system of social sanctions.⁴

Equally important, Kumlin et al observe that an ethnic minority in a society displays lower levels of trust compared to the majority. Ethnic minorities must necessarily deal with many members and aspects of a dominant culture that is relatively unlikely to arouse affection, understanding, and trust in other peoples. In their point of view, then, the deficit of trust is associated with oppression, economic hardship, and discrimination. They go on to argue that some scholars recently have increasingly called into question the notion that minorities in a society are necessarily less trusting than the majority. ⁵

Aspects of a dominant culture that is relatively unlikely to arouse affection, understanding, and trust in other peoples. In their point of view, then, the deficit of trust is associated with oppression, economic hardship, and discrimination. They go on to argue that some scholars recently have increasingly called into question the notion that minorities in a society are necessarily less trusting than the majority. ⁵

The overriding stimulus of this paper was that the Yezidi communities maintain diverse qualities and quantities of trust across their communities, and this stark diversity reminds one of the diverse colors in their symbolic "Peacock". But before addressing this simple question that how two geographically distanced communities of Yezidis may enjoy two noticeably different states of trust, it important here to provide a short description of this ethnic minority. The Yezidis are a very small ethno-religious minority, who, due to the drawing of political borders of World War I, were spread over several Middle Eastern countries. All Yezidis speak their native language as a form of the northern Kurdish language known as "Kurmanji"; however, most of them have adopted the official language of their host communities. Although most Yezidis consider themselves ethnic Kurds, some communities, particularly in Armenia and the Sinja Mountains, want to be regarded as Yezidis, as a distinct ethnicity with their own Yezidi language. ⁶

The article proceeds in five sections. The first introductory section provides an overview on the importance of trust and its general contributions to the survival of minorities, as well as a short history of the ethno-religious minority of Yezidis. The second section takes a step to look at the heart of the Yezidi community of north Iraq in order to have a close scrutiny in the situation of this minority, both under Saddam and after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. On the radar screen of the next section, then, the signals of a developing, promising trust-charged community of Yezidis are observed, a community which comprises the largest ethnic minority in Armenia. The fourth section, accordingly, elaborates on feasible suggestions which may contribute to promoting trust within those communities which are suffering from a deficit trust. And finally, the fifth section concludes and expands on the lines of argument presented so far.

Yezidis in post-Saddam Iraq: one step forward or two steps back?

Generally, nations plagued with ethno-religious conflicts face innumerable setbacks in developing habits of trust and honesty. In such societies, dishonest behavior toward the ethnic minorities engaged in such clashes is acceptable, and in particular, trusting relationships extend little beyond the circle of family and close friends. If one traces the detrimental effects of such clashes on a minority, it may be useful to look at the Yezidis of north Iraq who, always have been embroiled in a historical simmering conflict with the ruling governors of Iraq, be it the Saddam regime or the Kurds.

Under the pro-Arab Saddam regime, Yezidi towns and villages suffered from repression and neglect, and the members of the community were subject to a severe state of poverty and illiteracy. In addition, they were required to register themselves as Arab in ethnicity. ⁷ Moreover, all Yezidi populated areas were subject to heavy Arabization policies carried out by the Iraqi government in the 1970s and 1980s which led the local Kurdish population to leave their villages and live in several mujammas, collective towns in the plains far from their fields and villages in the mountains. Their villages were either destroyed or given to local Sunni Arab tribes. As a result, this scattered ethnic group lacked a cohesive, strong community that is central for survival amidst the simmering ethno-religious conflict. ⁸ The Yezidis tolerated such adversities until the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. It led them to develop high hopes in the creation of a new Iraq, and dreamed of a new free society and for democracy in a new Iraq. However, the ghost of Saddam stalked the region but this time in the form of a Kurdish political system, to haunt the hopes of this deprived minority through similar suppression and forced assimilation. ⁹

Decades of repressive rule have fractured the individual and collective identities of Iraqis. The climate of terror engendered a breakdown of trust and confidence at all levels of society. Having lived under an autocratic state that imposed a single Iraqi identity for decades, many Iraqis emerged from the 2003 war torn between the state-imposed civic identity and their own ethnic and religious identities. ¹⁰

Since the beginning of the sectarian warfare in mid-2004, Maisel articulates, the political and security situation of the Yezidis went from bad to worse, and the number of attacks against them has been in rising, especially in the Province of Nineveh. These events, accordingly, were hardly featured in the local or international press. Unlike other involved groups, such as the Christian exile community or neighboring Sunni countries, the Yezidis have no institutionalized lobby that could bring the ongoing disasters to the attention of the wider world. The tragic scenario of the Yezidis of north Iraq has motifs as diverse as: killing, kidnapping, intimidating, public campaign to convert or to be killed, political and economic trespasses, and threatening the Yezidi educated elites with attack and kidnapping their family members.¹¹

The KDP, which controls most of the Yezidi areas in north Iraq, has adopted a two-fold-approach toward the Yezidis: they promote the distinct Kurdish origin of the Yezidis and portray them as their ethnic brothers, and invest considerably in their religious and cultural rituals. Most of the members of the KDP-funded Lalish Cultural Center, for example, are said to be members of the KDP. In doing so, this party has managed to create an atmosphere of dependency and patronage, which hinders the Yezidis from developing independent political groups or NGOs.¹²

Following the invasion, the Iraqi religious minorities including Yezidis, Christians, Jews and Shabaks have become direct targets of violence including murder, abduction, rape, and looting of homes and property. In 2009, for example, Minority Rights Group International (MRG) reported that some 15 to 64 per cent of Iraqi refugees were from religious and ethnic minorities. Leaving aside the story of refugees from this violence, those who remain in Iraq repeat a common dreary story on the impacts of conflicts on their life. In 2007, for example, the ancient Yezidi community became the victim of the single most brutal attack on a minority since the fall of Saddam: the truck bombing in August 2007 that killed more than 400 Yezidis. Moreover, women have not been exempted from this unbridled violence against minorities. They have been forced to wear the hijab and have been unable to go out without being accompanied by a male relative. Those who have lost their male relatives experience a double vulnerability which goes with such a position. As well as the loss of lives and livelihoods, cultural traditions are fading, as they are forced from their ancient homeland to exile in destinations from Australia to Sweden.

When the beliefs and customs of minority communities are not well-known, they may be viewed with suspicion and fear. Persistent historical myths such as Yezidis who practice devil worship have spurred most of the current discrimination and violence against them. Such misunderstandings have reduced sympathy from the rest of the nation to defend Yezidis and to protect their human rights.¹³ Despite their geographic isolation and numerical size in Iraq, the Yezidis are less able to escape the mounting clashes. Unlike the Christians, who can pay a tax to stay in their homes, the Yezidis face conversion, expulsion, and execution.¹⁴

Cracking regional riddles; Are the Yezidis of Armenia a lesson for north Iraq?

"The Yezidi volunteers are unceasingly sacrificing their lives upon the altars of Karabakh".¹⁵

Mapping the history of the Yezidis before the Soviet Union is a daunting task beyond the scope of the present paper, so the focus is on what followed since the rule of Soviet through these days.

The history of the Yezidis during the Soviet Union's time remains a relative unknown sub-narrative in the murky history of the Kurds in general. Under the Soviet, the Yezidis "disappeared" from many official sources, since the Soviet state took language, rather than religion, as the key marker of national identity. Although early Soviet demographic documents recorded Yezidis as a separate group, this was no longer the case after the 1930s, when Yezidis were streamlined into a singular Kurdish nationality. This appeared as part of a Union-wide initiative to streamline the state's ethnic diversity into more manageable, centralized nationalities. A Yezidi identity, then, did not re-emerge in official sources and documents until the collapse of Soviet rule and the re-emergence of independent statehood in the South Caucasus.

Historically, Armenia has been the most popular destination of Yezidi migrations from the eastern parts of the Ottoman Empire. In addition to holding the largest Yezidi population, Armenia was also the center of Kurdish culture in the Soviet Union. Both Yezidis and Muslim Kurds found a relative haven in Soviet Armenia, which proved a focal point for the Soviet Kurdish community. **16**

Although from the early 1990s some Yezidis began to migrate for economic reasons, mainly to Russia and Germany, where a Kurdish Diaspora exists, they insist that such migration is temporary, and they lack a homeland other than Armenia. **17**

If they understood the current situation of the Yezidis in Armenia, the Diaspora might be smaller.

Currently, the Yezidis live en masse and scattered mostly in rural areas of Aragats, Armavir, Ashtarak, Talin, Artashat, Abovian, etc, as well as in the cities of Yerevan, Echmiadzin, Armavir, and Ashtarak. They have retained their traditional lifestyle of nomadic stockbreeding and more recently practicing gardening. However, Yezidi intellectuals, journalists, lawyers, and physicians are city dwellers. Traditionally, the Yezidis have not been too actively involved in the administrative structure, however, lately, this has slowly been changing with signs of involvement in the public and political life of the country. **18**

According to the Council of Europe Committee of Experts of the ECRML, Yezidi education is offered at the primary and secondary level in most of the fourteen villages where Yezidi communities live. **19** In the same vein, there are historic academic traditions in Yezidi Studies. At the turn of the 20th century, for example, Armenian scholars published the first works on the Yezidi anthropology, ethnography, history, and folklore. **20**

Although the Republic of Armenia functions mainly on the basis of a centralized political power, a decentralization process has gradually developed. Of note is a political party called "Yezidkhana Party", formed along ethnic lines, which seeks to represent the interests of the Yezidi minority. The Government of the republic of Armenia has established a Department for Ethnic Minorities and Religious Affairs, whose mission includes policy-making initiatives on issues associated with minority groups and drafting legislations on national minorities. Besides, this governmental department adopts awareness rising measures on relevant minority issues, and engages in a dialogue with representatives from minority communities on matters of concern. **21**

In the civil and political sphere, furthermore, there does not seem to be an overall pattern of systematic discrimination against the Yezidis. They may, if resources allow, freely produce their own cultural associations, media and community events. **22**

Acknowledging the Yezidi identity, on the other hand, has enabled the Yezidis to revive: a program has been established at the Armenian National Radio, publications has been started of " DANGE EZDIA" (The Voice of the Yezidis), new NGOs have emerged with the Yezidi minority as their stakeholder (e.g., The Yezidi National Committee, The Yezidi National Union of Armenia and the world, and The Yezidi National Union), and the Yezidi Clerical Council was registered at the Committee of Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Armenia. **23**

"Waiting for Godot": Will social trust show up on the stage of the Yezidis of north Iraq?

Samuel Beckett's existential dilemma in the theater is seen on the world stage in a nation that has undergone regime change without the emergence of social trust. Most scholars agree trust is not a phenomenon that is readily produced in an intentional manner. For example, Coleman argues that as a rational account of human behavior, trust can only be built in informal, closed, small, and homogeneous communities which are able to enforce normative sanctions. However, one is left to wonder how trust is built within communities, especially in heterogeneous communities. **24**

This issue is central to the problem of trust among the Yezidis. Below are feasible suggestions which may be the solution of this problem in the context of the heterogeneous society of north Iraq.

According to Sztompka, the culture of trust is more likely to appear in democratic rather than nondemocratic political systems. He notes that nothing is more detrimental to undermining trust than the violation and abuse of democratic principles which leads to the spread of cynicism. When people live in a democracy, then, they develop a kind of meta-trust, trust in democracy itself as the ultimate insurance of other kinds of trust they may venture. He argues that the failure of democracy is more destructive for the culture of trust than a outright autocratic regime. In the later case, the citizens at least know what to expect, they have no illusions, whereas in the former case their hopes are disappointed and their expectations violated, producing even greater disenchantment.

Not only does democracy provoke trust, Sztompka continues, but also, once in place, the culture of trust contributes to sustaining democracy. There are a variety of democratic factors which require social trust. First, democracy requires communication among its citizens: the exchange of opinions, the formulation of political choices, and the articulation of political support. Second, democracy requires tolerance: acknowledgment of differences, recognition of plurality of ideas, lifestyles, tastes, and ethnic minorities. Third, democracy replaces conflict and struggle by compromise and consensus. Trust also allows its citizens to assume the integrity and goodwill of others. And fourth, democracy requires participation. It needs active citizens, ready to get engaged in the democratic institutions, as well as the associations and organizations of civil society. Citizens' participation, on the other hand, requires some measure of trust in the political regime, as it requires at least a minimum of trust in their fellow citizens.²⁵

The argument is that a dense network of voluntary associations and citizens' organizations help to sustain civil society and community relations in a way that generates trust and cooperation between citizens and a high level of civic engagement and participation.²⁶ This solution which has also been referred to as "participatory socialization" implies that society and associations are schools of democracy, where people can learn how to practice democratic rights, even on a basic level. They acquire the attitudes of being citizens, participating in public life, developing a culture of trust and tolerance which, in turn, serve as a mechanism against attacks on their freedom.²⁷

Then, Fukuyama approaches the problem with an emphasis on the role of the family in strengthening a deficit of social trust. He observes that family breakdown affects broader social trust relations. Social trust within families and outside families are distinct phenomena, and can be inversely correlated in female societies common in traditional communities.²⁸

Seedo Rasho, a Yezidi human rights activist witnessed the critical situation of his minority brethren in north Iraq, focuses on the implications of the law for making a difference in the status quo of this minority in north Iraq. While insisting on making others aware of the situation and making the best use of the potentials of the ethnic minorities of north Iraq, he goes on to suggest other concrete measures.

First, he sees the need for an international lobby of political parties, NGOs, and other human rights defenders around the world to manage an advocacy campaign; second, forming a semi-autonomous region under the protection of the international community; and third, redistributing national wealth based on residency rights, not on clan and tribal ties, to decrease migrations among the minority groups from this region.²⁹

The latter suggestion by Seedo Rasho corresponds to this notion that "being treated fairly and respectfully will instill among community members a sense of inclusiveness from which follows increased social trust and order".³⁰

The incorporation of the Yezidis of north Iraq within the heterogeneous community of north Iraq will be an asset which can enrich the region's trust culture. It could serve as a showcase of responsibility and tolerance for an ethno-religious minority which never harbored animosity toward other religions, but has faced continues affronts and atrocities from other religious communities. According to these

lines of argument, the Godot of the Yezidis of north Iraq will not show up on the stage unless they are endowed with a democratic stage on which they are trusted and treated fairly.

Tentative conclusions:

The presupposition of this paper was that the scattered communities of the Yezidis are enjoying levels of social trust that are as diverse as the colors of their proverbial the "Peacock" symbol. To test this claim, two Yezidi communities, one in north Iraq and other in Armenia, were selected for study. Following a brief overview on the importance of social trust, and especially its contributions to promoting the life of ethnic minorities, records of Yezidis life was considered under the rule of Saddam and after the US-led invasion in 2003. Not only have under Saddam, but also under the Kurds rule, the Yezidis been drenched in a mostly trust-free society. The paper then looked at the Yezidi community in Armenia which is far more conducive to germinating a culture of trust. Based on freer access to NGOs, related associations, having a political party, more access to Yezidi media, and an increasingly active participation in the political and public life of their homeland, it appears that Yezidis of Armenia may serve as a lesson for north Iraq. And finally, after reviewing these communities' life indicates a stark difference in their culture of trust, suggestions were provided which may be of potential use in promoting trust among ethnic minorities, especially the Yezidis.

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