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Editorial | Martin van Bruinessen[ϒ]

The travellers, diplomats, missionaries and academics who have written on the Kurds have always shown a remarkable fascination with the Yezidis. The great Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi, who in the mid-seventeenth century wrote so extensively on diverse aspects of Kurdish culture, social life and political organisation that he may well be called the first Kurdologist, was also one of the first to write some tantalising observations on customs and practices of the Yezidis he encountered. He also reports in some detail on two punitive campaigns mounted by Ottoman governors against the Yezidis of Sinjar, in one of which he played a minor role himself. Christian missionaries based in Kurdistan were drawn to the Yezidis as the major non-Muslim and non-Christian community and fascinated by what they understood of its elusive theology. Two of the founders of West European academic Kurdology, C. J. Edmonds and Roger Lescot, devoted some of their major work to the Yezidis, and most Kurdish experts have felt the need to pay due attention to the Yezidi religion. Several of the ideologists of Kurdish nationalism, finally, have elevated the Yezidis to the status of most authentic Kurds. For more has been written about the Yezidis and their religion than about the religious practices and institutions of the Muslim Kurds, reflecting a bias among both foreign academics and secular Kurdish nationalists.

In discussions on Kurdish identity, reference to the Yezidis appears almost unavoidable. Although they are but a small minority among the Kurds, they are a defining element, even if only by their being different from the majority. They are not representative but somehow widely felt to be exemplary, much like the Yezidis' history of persecution is felt by many Kurds to be exemplary of the history of their entire people. Yezidis often speak of their history as a series of murderous campaigns, *ferman* (literally, imperial edict), aiming to subjugate them and destroy their religion. The mother of all *ferman*, lively remembered in oral narratives throughout Kurdistan, was the Armenian *ferman* of 1915, the order to deport and kill the Armenians. The Yezidis remember not less than seventy-two or seventy-three *ferman* against their community. By extension, some campaigns to wipe out Kurdish nationalist resistance have come to be called by the same name. In his haunting elegy on the Halabja massacre, the singer Şivan Perwer strings together the names of

ϒ Martin van Bruinessen is Emeritus Professor of Islamic Studies at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Email: m.vanbruinessen@uu.nl.

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earlier campaigns against Kurdish uprisings, much like Yezidis count the *ferman* of their community's history. The gassing of Halabja in March 1988 was the prelude to the much larger *Anfal* campaign later that year, which is now widely recognised as a genocide. The traumas of Halabja and the *Anfal* are inscribed in the memories of Kurds not only in Iraqi Kurdistan but in the other parts as well; for many, this shared memory is part of what it means to be a Kurd. The latest *ferman* against the Yezidis, the assault on Sinjar by the so-called Islamic State, with its indiscriminate murder of men, enslavement of women, and forced conversion of children – with which most of the contributions in this issue are concerned – was almost immediately recognised as one of the most shocking cases of genocide and drew the world's attention to the Yezidis like nothing had done before. Not only for Yezidis, but for Kurds in general, the 2014 genocide of Sinjar constitutes a defining moment of history and identity.

The Kurds, however, also have to face some uncomfortable truths in connection with the assault and occupation of Sinjar by ISIS. Peshmerga units that were supposed to protect Sinjar withdrew in the face of the (admittedly, far superior) Islamist forces. And Yezidis report that their own Muslim neighbours, with whom they had long lived in peace and mutual support, sided with the Islamists in the attack and took part in the killing and pillage. These Muslim neighbours-turned-enemies included not only Arabs but apparently Kurds as well. This resonated with memories of earlier *ferman* that were not carried out on orders of the sultan or his governors but by local Kurdish rulers. Both Bedir Khan Beg of Botan and Mir Muhammad of Rowanduz, the two last great lords of semi-independent Kurdish emirates, carried out massacres of Yezidis in the 1830s and these are still vividly remembered. Mistrust of Muslims – Kurds as well as Arabs or Turks – has steeply risen among the affected Yezidis. Although *pêşmerge* as well as PKK guerrillas have taken part in re-establishing a degree of security in Sinjar again and have vowed to protect the Yezidis, and in spite of the real solidarity and support shown to the displaced Yezidis by numerous Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, the events appear to have deepened the existing fault line separating Yezidis and Muslim Kurds.

The guest editors of this special issue, Philip Kreyenbroek and Khanna Omarkhali, have made their mark with earlier important studies on the Yezidis. Kreyenbroek's work, beginning with the path-breaking *Yezidism* (1995), is especially remarkable for the comparative perspective that his considerable knowledge of other Iranian religions allows and for his close collaboration with Yezidi intellectuals in editing and interpreting the Yezidi religious texts that until recently were handed down orally. Khanna Omarkhali is the leading academic of Yezidi background, with a thorough training in the Russian tradition of Oriental studies and a rapidly expanding list of publications in Russian, English and Kurdish. The Kurdish version of her book on social organisation, symbols and ritual of the Yezidis (2007) was a

modest bestseller in Turkey. The editors have earlier collaborated in a volume on the Yezidi diaspora in Europe and the efforts to redefine the Yezidi religion and develop supporting institutions. For the present issue, they have brought together contributions describing and analysing the ISIS onslaught, the Yezidis' flight and displacement, and the impact of these events on their social and religious life. Another underlying theme, present implicitly in several of the contributions, is that of Yezidi identity and its redefinition vis-à-vis the (other) Kurds – which is likely to remain a contested issue in the foreseeable future.

Although it is too early to state so with any confidence, it is my guess that especially the observations of shifts and changes in Yezidi ritual practices as a result of the massive displacement from Sinjar will be among the major merits of this special issue. The assault on Sinjar and the Yezidi genocide are among the most traumatic events in the recent history of the Yezidis and of Kurdistan and need to be remembered and commemorated. This special issue is our journal's modest contribution.

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Editors' acknowledgement

It is our pleasure to publish this issue of *Kurdish Studies* specifically themed on the Yezidis at a critical historical juncture in the history of Kurdistan and the Middle East. We would like to sincerly thank the guest editors, the authors, the book reviewers and everyone else who made this special issue possible for their committed work and collaboration. Special thanks also go to Kübra Sağır, Ergin Öpengin, Farangis Ghaderi and Seevan Saeed for kindly translating all the abstracts into Kurdish.

Welat Zeydanlıoğlu and Ibrahim Sirkeci
Managing editors of *Kurdish Studies*

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