

Answers to the questions of Vahakn Karakachian, the Editor of the Armenian newspaper Horizon in Montreal Canada

Dear Seyfi,

Here are the questions regarding our interview. I will confess, that i myself knew very little about zaza and kirmanci identities.

This interview will be very educational for armenians. I will send the interview to our sister publications in Armenia, Lebanon, USA, Argentina, Greece, Australia, Syria, Russia and Iran.

During the last three weeks, i did some research on the zaza subject.

I found out, that some of our largest nobilty houses became assimilated with kurds during the Arab rule in Armenia, in late 9-th century. Those houses included the house of the Mamikonians, Rashdunik, Moks...

There is a missing link in the history of armenians and Zazas. I hope historians, like yourself could one day find that link (you already have).

Here are the questions of the interview.

Best regards

Vahakn

Questions

- Why is the Zaza question coming forward today?
- What is the difference between kurd kizilbash alevi and zazas?
- In one of your articles you mention zazas having some armenian ancestral roots (Mamikonians). How did you come to this conclusion?
- The sunni kurds insist that there is no distinct zaza people as such. How do you explain this "theory"?
- What is the difference between a turkish alevi and a kurdish alevi?
- Where is the zaza homeland? What are the boundaries of a free Zazaistan?
- Some western historians proclaim, that during the 1890's many armenians in the Dersim area converted to alevism to avoid turkish forced islamization. Have you done any research on this subject?
- How do you explain the kurdish involvement in the massacre of armenians during the Armenian Genocide?
- Have you ever met "hidden armenians" during your political activities in Dersim and the surrounding areas?
- What is the goal of your organization? What strategy does your organisation have to achieve its goal?

Answers

Seyfi Cengiz

Dear Vahakn,

Thinking over your questions I decided to make some introductory remarks on Dersim and Kızılbaz people before I answer them.

Dersim is neither a minority within minority, nor a question within question.

Since the Kingdom of Sophene Dersim seems to have been a part of Western Armenia. The Little Armenia or the Roman part of Armenia roughly corresponds to the historical Dersim. After the War of Çaldıran in 1514, Dersim was nominally annexed by the Ottomans and included in newly established Kurdistan. In later times this inclusion has been used as an argument by Kurdish nationalists to proclaim Dersim.

The country called Dersim covers the provinces of Tunceli, Erzincan, Bingöl, Elazığ, and parts of Muş, Sivas and Malatya. It is not limited with the borders of Tunceli as the Turkish state claims. The

province of Tunceli is only the inner part of Dersim.

Dersimis are a distinct people. Dersim is a separate question on its own. It is not a part of Zaza, Armenian or Kurdish questions as some nationalist circles proclaim. These are quite distinct questions from each other, whatever the ties or similarities between these peoples in terms of their origins, ethnical structures or languages may be. One has to understand and recognize the differences between them.

This is the first point I like to make for the sake of clarity.

Secondly, a brief explanation on the term “Kızılbaş” would be useful too, before answering the questions.

The term Kızılbaş has been in use since the end of 15th century, especially since the war of Çaldıran in 1514, between Ottomans and Safawids. There has been a large community called “Kızılbaş” and a Kızılbaş question caused by the Ottoman genocides ever since. This Kızılbaş community based itself in and around Dersim right from the beginning. For nearly five or six centuries from 1514 up to Dersim genocide in 1938, Dersim had been the only land where the Kızılbaş people lived autonomously. The term Kızılbaş has become synonymous with Dersim in this centuries long process. Dersim has been the center and hart of the Kızılbaş community all along.

Therefore the Dersim and Kızılbaş questions are very closely connected with one another. They can not be separated or considered separately.

During the wars between Russians and Ottomans, especially from 1860’s onward, the people of Dersim have began to put forward some national demands such as the right of education in local languages and a self-rule in Dersim, in addition to the religious rights. These demands seem to have been supported then by its allies, Russians and Armenians, who alongside the American Protestant missionaries played a significant part in the emergence of the national awareness in Dersim.

Thus a new dimension added to the Dersim question alongside the Kızılbaş one.

In other words it has become a two-fold question.

To sum up, one must not mix the Dersim question with the Kurdish, Zaza or Armenian questions. Ethnically speaking Dersim is a synthesis on its own. People of Dersim are composed of tribes from different origins, such as of Armenians, Asurians, Turkomans, Kurds and Zazas. This combination does not see or name itself as Armenian, Kurd or Zaza.

In linguistic terms Dersim has always had more than one languages. At present, apart from Turkish, two languages called Kurmanci and Kırmancki are spoken. Though these languages are somewhat related with the Kurdish and Zazaki, the speakers of these languages do not see or name themselves as Kurds or Zazas. They use the terms Kurmanc and Kırmanç for themselves, by which do not mean Kurds or Zazas.

The Kurmanc and Kırmanç are the main components of the people. The umbrella names are Dersim and Dersimis, regardless of the origins and the languages spoken. Besides, the presently spoken languages do not necessarily refer to the ethnical origin or identity. There are communities such as Armenians who changed their languages for different reasons.

People of Dersim do not make any distinction between their components neither in terms of origins nor in terms of languages spoken. It has been the case for centuries. It is the nationalists of the Muslim societies around Dersim who tries to partition the country along the linguistic lines, because of their nation-building and expansionist policies. I believe this much would be enough to underline the main points.

Here are the answers to the questions.

I divided your questions into four groups to answer them together. Each group covers the related questions. They are arranged according to the subjects.

Where is the Zaza homeland? What are the boundaries of a free Zazaistan? The sunni kurds insist that there is no distinct zaza people as such. How do you explain this "theory"? Why is the Zaza question coming forward today?

The majority of the people who call themselves “Zaza” live in the provinces, such as Bingöl, Elazığ, Urfa and Diyarbakır. In addition to these places, some Zaza colonies exist in several other towns and cities. This is the area where the only Zaza rebellion took place in 1925. Roughly speaking the limits

of this rebellion can be considered as the proper borders of Zaza homeland. This region as a whole has never formed an autonomous unit in history. It has never been known as “Zazaistan”. This name is a fabrication of the Zaza nationalists who also add Dersim into this imaginary map, because of their expansionist policy. The contry they preach does not exist.

My answer to the third part of the question is this:

Almost all Kurdish nationalists deny the existence of Zaza people. They refuse to accept a distinct Zaza identity. The reason for this is not the religion of the Kurds. Because both Kurds and Zazas are Muslim and Sunni communities. The theory of denial is related with the nationalism. The main reasons are the nationalist and expansionist policies of the Kurdish movement. Each nationalism copy the others, as Kurds copy the Turks when Zazas and Dersimis are the issue , so do Zazas when the issue is Dersim. They do not bear differences, plurality, a multi-cultural society in any terms. They are after a uniform nation-state.

As for the last part of the question:

There had never been a Kurdish or Zaza question until the mid of 19th century, whereas the Dersim question has its roots as far back as Çaldıran War as I mentioned above. Briefly speaking the Dersim, Kurdish and Zaza questions are separate questions. They differ not only in terms of their history, but their root causes, demands and allies either.

The word “question” in this context has a political meaning. In this sense it is questionable whether or not there exists a “Zaza question” as yet separable from that of Kurdish, although the potential is there. What we see is the birth of Zaza nationalism as from the end of 1980’s. It is still in its first stage almost where it started and has lots of weeknesses that do not allow it to merge with the masses concerned. Various factors played their part at birth of Zaza nationalism. I have discussed them in details in our magazine called [Desmala Sure](#) since 1990’s and also on internet forums between the years of 2003-2007. The articles over this issue can be found on the web page [dersim38.org](#) all together. Here I confine myself to pointing only two factors, the Kurdish nationalism and the Dersim question. The present Zaza nationalism could be described as a reaction to the Kurdish and Dersim/Kızılbaş opposition. It is a reaction to the democratic opposition more than a challenge to the Turkish colonial rule. One can realise this by examining their practice and literature.

What is the difference between Kurd Kizilbash Alevis and Zazas? What is the difference between a Turkish Alevi and a Kurdish Alevi?

The diferences between Dersimis and Zazas are already explained in the introductory paragraphs. In ethnical terms this contrast can be seen by comparing Mamikonian-Partian combination with Sasanians.

There might be some people here or there who use or prefer to use the terms such as “Kızılbaş Kurds”, “Kızılbaş Zazas” or “Kızılbaş Turks” because of the influence of various nationalisms on the rise. The individual cases like this, do not change the general self-definition of the Kızılbaş. The Kızılbaş people mostly name themselves as Dersimis, not Kurds, Zazas or Turks. It is the outsiders including the nationalist of the Muslim communities bordering Dersim who use the above terms. The usages of this sort that leave out the name Dersim and replace it with the terms Turks, Kurds or Zaza are the evidence of the denial of the Dersim question all together. At least they are the signs of a partial acceptance of the question only. That is to say the Kızılbaş question is supposedly accepted leaving out the Dersim connection, which are in fact unseperable from one another.

The term “Alevi” came into being after the Ottoman army called “Yeniçeri” is demolished in 1826. This army had close connections with the Bektashi movement. Shortly after this time the communities known as the Kızılbaş (Safavids) and Bektashis all together have been named as “Alevis” by outsiders. Therefore the term “Alevi“ covers two major sections, the Kızılbaş and Bektashi wings. Bektashis can be seen as “Turkish Alevis”. The rest of the “Alevis” are the Kızılbaş, who are mistakenly named as “Kürdish Alevis” by outsiders. The more proper way is to identify the Kızılbaş with the people of Dersim and Dersim-related colonies that dispersed all over Turkey. The Kızılbaş identity comes first among the Kızılbaş society.

The communities known as the Bektashi and Kızılbaş have been on opposite sides in almost every major conflict since the war of Çaldıran in 1514. As from 1860’s the Bektashi movement identified

itself with the Turkish nationalism whereas the Kızılbaş sufizm functioned as a ideology of the Dersim resistance to the Ottoman and Turkish domination.

In one of your articles you mention Zazas having some Armenian ancestral roots (Mamikonians). How did you come to this conclusion? Have you ever met "hidden Armenians" during your political activities in Dersim and the surrounding areas? Some western historians proclaim, that during the 1890's many Armenians in the Dersim area converted to Alevism to avoid Turkish forced İslamization. Have you done any research on this subject? How do you explain the Kurdish involvement in the massacre of Armenians during the Armenian Genocide?

What I mentioned was infact the connection between the Mamikonians and the Early Dersimis.

Mamikonians are regarded as "Armenians" in the Armenian histories. This theory still needs to be proved. As is known even Parthians and Assurians of Armenia regarded as such in Armenian literature.

My conclusions on the connection of Mamikonians and Early Dersimis based upon lots of evidences. I only mention few of them here. The name "Mananalı" of Armenian geography still exists in the form of "Mamekiye" in Dersim. Mamekiye (Mananalı) is an alternative name for inner Dersim where there is also a tribe called "Maman". These names are in my view related to the Mamikonians.

According to the Mamikonian's own tradition they come from Tzanica (Çanestan) and are related with the Tzanians. Nicolas Adontz, dealing with the etymology of the word Dersim, comes to the conclusion that the second part of this word, i.e. Sim, is the same with the name Tzan, which takes the form of Çin or Sin in Arabic and Persian languages as Adontz explains in a convincing way. İn Adontz's view the name "Terjan" nearby Mananalı is the Armenian form of Dersim as well. These are strong evidences.

Finally I have to mention one of the national traditions of Dersimis, which is the most important evidence on the connection between Mamikonians and Early Dersimis. This tradition I'm talking about is the living version of that of Mamikonians in my opinion.

People of Dersim have two general traditions regarding their origin. According to one of them all Dersimis are descended from two ancestors, called Khal Mem and Khal Ferat. These two figures are introduced as brothers and sons of a certain "Mamık". The same tradition divides the tribes of Dersim between the two brothers accordingly, "Sons of Khal Mem" and "Sons of Khal Ferat". This is what the tradition says. To me, the Khal Mem-Khal Ferat tradition is the surviving version of the Mamikonion tradition which we know from the early Armenian classics, such as Moses Khorenatsi's book. In my studies I identified the name Khal Mem with the Mamikonians and that of Khal Ferat with the Partians of the Armenian history. Mamikonians and Parthians are the early peoples of Dersim. This early stratum is usually called "the ancient nation" ("Mıleto Khan"), sometimes as "Armanians" by the people of Dersim. They, in my opinion, must be the very ones who are referred to as "Hidden Armenians" by outsiders. Although these early Dersimis hide their "Armenian" identity in order to survive, they have never forgotten their tradition of Khal Mem-Khal Ferat mentioned above. Being the one, who identified the Early Dersimis with the Mamikonians and Partians for the first time, how can I do not meet them. Furthermore, the name Dersim itself originates from Mamikonians, as I have already explained above.

The thesis which says that "many Armenians in Dersim converted to Alevism to avoid Turkish forced İslamization" must be true, but this process of conversion is not restricted to the 1890's. On the contrary it goes as far back as Middle Ages, to the time of Late Dersimis' migration.

In the middle ages, between 10th and 16th centuries Dersim received several new migrations that all together constitutes the late stratum of Dersimis. The second national tradition of Dersimis is connected with this migration, which refers to the Şeyh Hasan and Seyit brothers, sons of a certain Şeyh Ahmet as their ancestors and names these late coming tribes as "the Şeyh Hasan" and "the Seydan" groups.

In time these late comers became known as Dersimis too. Having adopted this name from the earlier natives, they imposed them both their Kızılbaş religion and languages, known as Kırmancki (Zazaki) and Kurmanci. It was thus that the land of Dersim has won the title "the land of monks and dervishes" among the people.

In my studies I identified these late comers with the Saltukies, Ukailids-Rıfais, Safavids and the

Akkoyunlu.

The modern Dersimis are mixture of these two main stratum.

Only a few tribes among the late comers considered as Zaza in origin by the people of Dersim. So, it is not proper to name the people of Dersim as Zaza, which would mean denying the other elements altogether. Besides the people of Dersim do not call themselves as Zaza, including the four tribes of Zaza origins. In Dersim the term “Zaza” is used for the Muslim neighbours.

“The Kurdish involvement in the massacre of Armenians during the Armenian Genocide” is a reality. It is already proven and explained in various studies. The Kurdish tribal brigades called “The Hamidiyes” had actively been used in the massacres of the Armenians first by Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamit the Second and later by the Turkish nationalists. In the Kurdish involvement the religious and nationalist motives played a great part alongside the interests of the Kurdish aristocracy.

What is the goal of your organization? What strategy does your organisation have to achieve its goal?

Our organization is called PSD, “**Partiya Serbestiya Dersimi**” (Freedom/Liberation Party of Dersim), which is a left and progressive party. Its urgent goal is a secular and democratic self-rule in Dersim. To this end a patriotic and democratic resistance based upon mass struggle is unavoidable. The support of international community is vital. This support is also searched for by “**The Initiative of Dersim 38**”, which has been started by the members of the PSD about two and half year ago. It aims to take the Turkish state to the court for the genocide committed in Dersim in the years of 1937 and 1938. It is supported by thousands of Dersimis and has more than a dozen of commities in Europe, Turkey and Dersim.

We also expect solidarity from our Armenian brothers.

Best regards

Seyfi Cengiz

28.6.2007