


The Growing Public Visibility of Yezidis in Germany: Strategies for Gaining Public Institution Status

Rosnąca widoczność jezydów w przestrzeni publicznej w Niemczech: strategie
na rzecz uzyskania statusu instytucji publicznej

ORAL ORPAK

Doctoral School of Social Sciences, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University
e-mail: oralorpak@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6579-4516>

Abstract: Germany has Europe's largest and most organized Yezidi diaspora. However, their pursuit of legal religious recognition as a minority religious sect faces several unique challenges: the country's decentralized federal system and the lack of a formal constitution for the Yezidi religion and society. Unlike countries with uniform integration policies, Germany leaves religious recognition up to its federal states, resulting in varying approaches. This lack of unity makes it more difficult for the Yezidi community, as they must adapt strategies to suit regional legal frameworks. To gain official recognition from the German federal states, e.g., the Yezidi community and its religion need to be more institutionalized within the Yezidi German diaspora. Understanding how they navigate this fragmented system of integration and how they preserve their traditions amid institutional pressures is therefore essential to assessing their progress toward official recognition. In this study, I aim to highlight the latest developments in the Yezidi society of Germany and outline their strategies for achieving official recognition.

Keywords: Yezidis, Yezidi diaspora in Germany, official recognition, institutionalized Yezidism

Streszczenie: Niemcy są krajem o największej i najlepiej zorganizowanej diasporze jezydzkiej w Europie. Mimo to dążenia jezydów do uzyskania prawnego uznania jako mniejszościowej wspólnoty religijnej napotykają istotne wyzwania wynikające ze zdecentralizowanego systemu federalnego oraz braku formalnej konstytucji religii jezydzkiej. W Niemczech uznanie religijne należy do kompetencji krajów związkowych, co z kolei prowadzi do zróżnicowanych rozwiązań i utrudnia formułowanie spójnych strategii. W konsekwencji społeczność jezydka musi dostosowywać swoje działania do odmiennych ram prawnych poszczególnych regionów. Aby uzyskać oficjalne uznanie, zarówno diaspora, jak i sama religia wymagają dalszej instytucjonalizacji. Zrozumienie, w jaki sposób jezydzi poruszają się w tym rozproszonym systemie integracji oraz jak zachowują swoje tradycje w warunkach presji instytucjonalnych, jest kluczowe dla oceny ich postępów na drodze do oficjalnego uznania. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie najnowszych

przemian w społeczności jezydzkiej w Niemczech oraz omówienie strategii, które podejmują na rzecz osiągnięcia oficjalnego uznania.

Słowa kluczowe: jezydzi, diaspora jezydзка w Niemczech, oficjalne uznanie, instytucjonalizacja jezydizmu

Yezidis, a religious minority from West Asian or Middle Eastern cultural regions, practice their religion, Yezidism, mainly in Kurdish languages. They are one of the heterodox communities within Kurdish society, alongside Kaka'is (Yarsan) and Alevis (Qizilbash) (Bruinessen 2000; Dulz 2016).

According to the statistics from the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Religious Studies Media and Information Service (REMID), there are one hundred thousand Yezidis in Germany.¹ They have become somewhat visible within German society, especially since the 2000s, and have taken part in public institutions across the country. Based on the data I collected from face-to-face interviews conducted in 2023 in Germany, Yezidis are afraid of losing their traditional Yezidism due to "the pressures of assimilation,"² while also seeking to gain status in public institutions or official religious recognition in Germany.

Despite historical limitations – such as the lack of an organized community and dedicated spaces – Yezidis in Germany have maintained their religious practices and rituals, mainly in private settings. Over the past twenty years, however, they have increasingly brought these traditions into the public sphere, marking a major shift in their religious and cultural expression. Their visibility now extends beyond cultural centers. The following quote from a Yezidi individual I met in 2023 supports this point:

I1MO³: The Yezidi population in Germany has increased significantly in recent years. In some schools, Yezidi students now make up fifty to sixty percent of the students. German authorities understand that this demographic change could lead to specific demands from the community in the future.

¹ According to the latest data shared at a symposium of the center of Gesellschaft Ezidischer AkademikerInnen The Yezidi population in Germany is reported to be 300,000. See GEA 17.09.2014.

² The decline in traditional Yezidi practices is often considered a result of assimilation. Many Yezidis in Germany describe this as a form of social pressure, an idea I have encountered frequently. Some of them call this "the pressure of assimilation" directly during our conversations.

³ I1 (Informant 1), M (Male), O (Oldenburg).

Yezidis plan to establish a fixed methodology for teaching their religion in public schools due to the increasing number of Yezidi students in recent years. Such situations bring the need to develop strategies to be officially recognized in different federal states of Germany. From this quote, we clearly understand that Yezidis expect several developments from federal states to make their lives easier in German public schools.

Their recent advocacy through newly established institutions helps shift Germany's societal discussion on religious groups. In this context, Jürgen Habermas' concept of "communicative rationality" offers a theoretical framework for understanding the potential role of religion in societal change in this study. The philosopher argues that modern, communicative reason alone is not enough to achieve social integration; religious sources can provide the cohesion needed for society (Habermas 1984). Additionally, J. Habermas suggests that religion should not be confined to the private sphere; instead, it can assist individuals in developing their moral intuitions by engaging with broader public discourse and societal traditions (Habermas 1996).

In the case of the Yezidis, their efforts to obtain official religious status in Germany are influenced by the frustration of assimilation, often occurring in environments where there are few spaces for religious practices. This situation prompts questions about the neutrality of the German State(s) and its approach to recognizing religious diversity.

1. Methodological Section, and the Conceptualization and Operationalization of the Study

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing empirical data gathered through ethnographic methods. The primary data collection techniques consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, guided by a schedule of open-ended questions. Participants were managers or heads of Yezidi cultural centers and associations, selected via purposive sampling to ensure they possessed comprehensive knowledge of community relations and public visibility. Data were collected through face-to-face engagements and observations in four German cities: Bielefeld, Celle, Hannover, and Oldenburg. To foster a trusting environment and enhance the authenticity of responses, all interactions were conducted in naturalistic settings.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic within the Yezidi community, obtaining informed consent was a carefully managed process. In accordance with ethical research standards and participant requests, all respondents have been guaranteed anonymity. They are referred to by pseudonymous codes (e.g., I1MO, denoting the first Informant, Male, from Oldenburg).

The research impetus emerged during preliminary fieldwork for the author's doctoral dissertation in Germany in 2023. Initial observations indicated a pronounced community focus on strategies for institutionalization and a strong desire to accelerate the process of gaining official religious recognition. This prompted a targeted investigation into how institutionalization is perceived as a mechanism for enhancing public visibility.

Morover, this study is grounded in several key concepts. First, institutionalization is operationalized as the initiatives undertaken to establish formal, structured organizations for the Yezidi religion and community, enabling it to function within a modern societal framework. Second, the analysis of institutionalization is situated within the broader context of integration. This study adopts a multidimensional understanding of this concept. For Rinus Penninx (2004: 3), integration is "the process of becoming an accepted part of society," encompassing legal, socio-economic, and cultural-religious dimensions. Similarly, Alastair Ager and Alison Strang (2008) provide a convergent framework, defining integration through key domains: achievement and access in employment; knowledge and practices of citizenship and rights; social connections between groups; and structural barriers to such connections related to the local environment, culture, and language.

Finally, the concept of official religious recognition is central, referring to the formal legal status granted to religious communities by the German state, a process with significant implications for integration policy. The interplay of these concepts – institutionalization as a community-driven strategy, integration as a state-level policy framework, and official recognition as a pivotal goal – forms the analytical core of this study.

2. German Federal States' Approaches to Religious Groups

Germany's 16 federal states (Bundesländer) have significant autonomy in regulating the registration of religious organizations. Unrecognized religious

communities are excluded from state-administered tax benefits, which are reserved for officially recognized religious entities under public law (*Körperschaften des öffentlichen Rechts*). Federal law gives authorities the power to classify certain non-traditional religious movements as “sects” and to distribute publicly accessible information – including advisories or warnings – about their activities.⁴ The current relationship between the state and religious institutions in Germany is governed by the system called *Staatskirchenrecht* (religious law; Seiwert 2003). Under German law, federal states (*Länder*) and religious institutions work as cooperative partners. The German Constitution (Article 4)⁵ guarantees freedom of religion while maintaining state neutrality in matters of faith, ideology, and worldview. Although the state remains neutral, it actively collaborates with religious communities, as shown through church taxes (*Kirchensteuer*) and religious education in public schools. However, such cooperation requires a religious group to have official recognition. Major faith communities – including Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim organizations, and Alevi (from 2020 onwards)⁶ can attain the status of a “corporation under public law” (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*). This designation grants them specific privileges, such as the right to collect church taxes and to provide confessional instruction in schools.

For the Yezidis, obtaining this status would not only confirm their legal standing but also support their integration into Germany’s organized religious community. The massacre of Yezidis by Islamic State (IS) in Iraq was recognized as “genocide” by the German parliament in 2023. The decision of Germany’s parliament, the Bundestag, is seen as a significant step by a large portion of Yezidi German society toward achieving institutional recognition soon. Consequently, Yezidis accelerated their efforts to become more visible within German society. Jürgen Habermas’s approach of communicative action is definitely suitable for the contemporary efforts of Yezidis. So, to navigate the complex relationship between the State and religion and to achieve official recognition from the German government, the Yezidis are expected to have strategies in harmony with the existing legal frameworks.

⁴ See U.S. Department of State 2021.

⁵ See The German Constitution n.d.

⁶ See *Alevism Gains Public Institution Status* 10.12.2025.

3. Increased Public Visibility and the Strategies That Were Developed

The Yezidi faith has generally not followed a formal daily routine. Instead, it has maintained a systematically organized social structure. In contrast, other religious groups in German society have well-established social and professional spheres. The Yezidi community, however, has lacked such formal arrangements. Additionally, religious instruction is provided irregularly, based on the leaders' convenience, rather than through a standardized system. Consequently, there is no formal institutionalization of religious education within the Yezidi diaspora in Germany. So, one of the most needed strategies is supposed to be concerning a formal Yezidism. Nonetheless, in recent years, the Yezidi community in Germany has developed strategies to establish a comparable system of structured religious education and increase public visibility. To achieve this, Yezidis have established institutions that might be considered as institutions of religion.



Figure. A constructed “prayer room” (*qub*) at Nordfriedhof Cemetery, Augsburg, representing the first Yezidi initiative of this kind in Germany. This gathering place for prayer represents the first effort by Yezidis, and such sites could help increase visibility of Yezidism in Germany
Source: Alt 8.08.2019.

The Qoba Ezi, is now considered as the place of gathering all Yezidis in Germany once a year. This structure made many Yezidis thinking about much more visibility. A head of a cultural center in Bielefeld, e.g., explains why they need the visibility of Yezidis as follows:

I2MB: Many Yezidis now hold German citizenship, and some residential areas have become predominantly Yezidi. Given these developments, local authorities may soon face increased expectations regarding cultural, religious, and social integration policies.

The vulnerability of cultural centers and organizations is evident in their efforts to achieve their goals. Being an organized religious group makes them more noticeable, which helps Yezidis develop more strategies in Germany. To gain institutional status, they first create plans for building gathering places for parents. Then they run newly opened cultural centers and humanitarian aid organizations. Below, I list several organizations established immediately after the 2014 genocide. It is noteworthy that there are over a hundred institutions and cultural centers within the German diaspora, and they are listed below. However, many of these organizations are inactive. They are actively working to increase the visibility of Yezidi society in Germany. Such efforts help Yezidis become a more organized and institutionalized community. But the first cultural centers were founded in the cities of Leer and Oldenburg in the 1990s (Wettich 2022). At that time, a few cultural centers were established in Germany in the 1990s. But today, the number of them is over one hundred.

Table. The latest Yezidi cultural centers in Germany

| Cities | The names of cultural centers | Year of founded |
|----------------|---|-----------------|
| Neuss/Dormagen | Rojnas Institution für ezidische Solidarität e.V | 2021 |
| Neunkirchen | Ezidische Jugend e.V in Saarland | 2018 |
| Düsseldorf | Ezidische Jugend Deutschland e.V | 2011 |
| Köln | Jezidische Kultur Köln e.V | 2016 |
| Köln | Jesiden Zentrum Köln e.V | 2006 |
| Köln | Ezdina Organization | 2017 |
| Bochum | Gemeinde der Eziden Bochum e.V | 2015 |
| Dortmund | Gemeinde der Yeziden in Dortmund und Umgebund e.V | 2015 |
| Münster | Ezidische Gemeinde in Münster e.V | 2014 |
| Bielefeld | Lalish Zentrum Deutschland | 2007 |
| Bielefeld | Deutsch-Ezidische Freundschaft e.V | 2016 |
| Unknown | Zentralrat der Eziden in Deutschland (aims to be federation) | 2017 |
| Unknown | Internationalen Unabhängiger Ezidischen Vereinigungen (aims to be federation) | 2021 |

Source: Rojnas Foundation for Ezidi Solidarity n.d.

However, with institutionalization, developments in the Yezidi community are expected in two main areas in Germany. The first concern is about “assimilation.” The idea that traditional Yezidism is being absorbed is a worry raised by nearly every Yezidi. On this issue, many Yezidis have a pessimistic outlook. The second concern is that, with institutionalization, the Yezidi community might enter a new phase and reconnect with the younger generation regarding traditional knowledge. Artur Rodziewicz (2025) frames this issue in the context of Georgia as follows:

The initiatives undertaken by the Yezidi Spiritual Council of Georgia (YSCG) and the founding of the Yezidi Academy have allowed the Yezidi community to enter a sphere traditionally controlled by institutionalized religions. By developing their religious institutions, formal theologies, and textual hermeneutics, the Yezidis are positioning themselves to gain recognition as a world religion on equal footing with more established faiths. This institutional growth could be especially important for engaging younger Yezidis who have previously shown weak religious ties (Rodziewicz 2025).

Based on interviews I conducted with Yezidi individuals, Yezidis in Germany aim to have formal theologies, religious institutions and textual hermeneutics. In this case, a Yezidi theology department will likely be established in Germany soon. This development would significantly advance the institutionalization of the Yezidi religion, and the situation A. Rodziewicz referred to may also soon apply to the German context. However, the fear of assimilation remains common among Yezidis. A Yezidi informant explains it as follows:

I3MC: European state systems adopt a more individual-focused rather than a collectivist approach in their governance structures. These systems emphasize personal autonomy and integration, prioritizing individual development and participation over group affiliations. The state encourages individual achievement, ensuring that success and labor contributions support the institutional order rather than promoting communal solidarity. As a result, individuals become more oriented toward systemic goals – focusing on personal growth and operational conditions – while gradually distancing themselves from their original group identity. This detachment and redirection process marks the initial stage of assimilation.

Besides the efforts of institutionalization, the Yezidi community in Germany has pursued multiple strategic paths to gain public institutional

recognition. These strategies include religious simplification, which involves deliberately shifting how religious knowledge is transmitted and sourced, making theological concepts more accessible and standardized. Additionally, they aim to accelerate the formalization of religious structures, including codified practices, centralized authority, and organizational frameworks that align with societal expectations of institutional religion. They also strive to remain politically neutral. They maintain a conscious distance from Kurdish political movements to preserve communal autonomy. Many Yazidi stakeholders argue that such affiliations hinder pan-Yezidi solidarity in Germany, as articulated by one institutional leader. Another Yazidi head of a cultural center I met in 2023 highlights his opinion regarding political issues preventing the Yazidis from achieving official recognition in Germany as follows:

I4MH: In 2017, representatives from all Yazidi households in Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony) gathered in a series of large assemblies to establish a central administrative body. During these meetings, they obtained the necessary permits and drafted plans to create a central council (Zentralrat) along with a unified community center. However, some Yazidi associations affiliated with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) refused to join the Zentralrat, as they maintained independent organizational structures. Their reluctance was due to political concerns, mainly the potential loss of influence within the community. Despite these divides, many households supported the Zentralrat, allowing two years of coordinated effort before political disagreements ultimately hampered the consolidation process.

Conclusion

The pursuit of official recognition for Yazidism in Germany potentially risks exacerbating intra-communal fragmentation. This stems from the fact that distinct Yazidi groups, shaped by divergent socio-political and economic backgrounds in their homelands, have historically constituted their own discrete institutions and organizations. As illustrated in Table, initiatives such as the establishment of the Zentralrat in 2017 aimed to consolidate these factions under a unified representative body. However, as qualitative data from a Yazidi informant suggests, this objective remains formidable, notwithstanding the religion's underlying theological coherence.

What is evident is that the Yezidi community in Germany is currently navigating a critical juncture of institutional modernization. Contemporary endeavors are focused on the development of formal religious structures, the codification of a sacred textual canon, and the systematic articulation of doctrine. These processes represent significant strides toward the formalization and codification of Yezidi religious practice. It is crucial to note, however, that these internal developments are fundamentally mediated by the external German political context.

Consequently, two primary challenges could adversely affect the long-term presence and visibility of Yezidis in Germany. The first is the imperative to resolve the internal crisis of unity. A reduction in internal divisions and political polarization is a prerequisite for the community's societal integration and sustainable visibility. The second, more external challenge, is the ascendancy of right-wing populism, a force that has gained significant traction in German political discourse since 2015. The long-term implications of this trend for the Yezidi community remain uncertain. While thus far the rhetoric of parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has predominantly targeted Muslims and Islam – whom the party frames as a central “concept of the enemy” (Beuter, Kortmann 2023) – the broader climate of ethnoreligious nationalism presents a complex and evolving challenge. This is exemplified paradoxically by the AfD's own 2022 parliamentary motion (hib 275/2022) calling for therecognition and condemnation of the genocide against the Yezidis.” In summary, while the Yezidi community is actively engaged in strategies to enhance its societal visibility, it has not yet formulated a coherent or public strategy to mitigate the potential threats posed by the rise of right-wing populism, leaving it potentially vulnerable to shifts in the political landscape.

References

- Ager, A., A. Strang (2008), *Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework*, “Journal of Refugee Studies” 21(2): 166–191. DOI: 10.1093/jrs/fen016.
- Alevism Gains Public Institution Status in Germany in Major Victory for Alevis* (10.12.2025), Duvar English, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/alevism-gains-public-institution-status-in-germany-in-major-victory-for-alevis-news-55415> (18.06.2025).

- Alt, A. (8.08.2019), *Augsburger Jesiden bauen ersten Gebetsort in Deutschland*. Augsburg Allgemeine, <https://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/augsburg/Augsburger-Augsburger-Jesiden-bauen-ersten-Gebetsort-in-Deutschland-id55133916.html> (28.05.2025).
- Beuter, C., M. Kortmann (2023), *Similar Yet Not the Same: Right-Wing Populist Parties' Stances on Religion in Germany and the Netherlands*, "Politics and Religion" 16(2): 374–392. DOI: 10.1017/S1755048322000062.
- Bruinessen, M. van (2000), *Kürtlük, Türklük, Alevilik: etnik ve dinsel kimlik mücadeleleri* [Being a Kurd, a Turk, an Alevi: Ethnic and Religious Identity Struggles], (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları).
- Dulz, I. (2016), *The Displacement of the Yezidis After the Rise of ISIS in Northern Iraq*, "Kurdish Studies Archive" 4(2): 131–147. DOI: 10.1163/9789004506138_004.
- The German Constitution ("Basic Law") (n.d.), https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/documents/66/Germany_Constitution_excerpts_en.pdf (21.06.2025).
- GEA (Gesellschaft Ezidischer AkademikerInnen) (17.09.2014), *Über die GEA*, <https://www.gea-ev.net/%C3%BCber-die-gea/> (10.05.2025).
- Habermas, J. (1984), *The Theory of Communicative Action*, (Boston: Beacon Press).
- Habermas, J. (1996), *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essay*, transl. W.M. Hohengarten, (Cambridge: MIT Press).
- Penninx, R. (2004), *Integration Processes of Migrants in the European Union and Policies Relating to Integration*. Presentation at the Conference on Population Challenges, International Migration and Reproductive Health in Turkey and the European Union, Istanbul, October 11–12, 2004, (Istanbul: Turkish Family Health and Planning Foundation): 1–19, <https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/turkeynetherlands/RinnusPenninx.pdf> (24.06.2025).
- Rodziewicz, A. (2025), *Towards the Institutionalization of Yezidism: The Akhtiarate of Georgia and the Yezidi Theological Academy*, "Kurdish Studies Journal" 3(1): 38–66. DOI: 10.1163/29502292-bja10009.
- Rojnas Foundation for Ezidi Solidarity e.V. [n.d.], *Rojnas Foundation for Ezidi Solidarity* [Facebook profile] (27.06.2025).
- Seiwert, H. (2003), *Freedom and Control in the Unified Germany: Governmental Approaches to Alternative Religions Since 1989*, "Sociology of Religion" 64(3): 367–375. DOI: 10.2307/3712490.
- U.S. Department of State (2021), *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Germany*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/germany/> (27.06.2025).
- Wettich, T. (2022), *Transformation Processes in the Yezidi Community in Germany*, [in:] Ph. Kreyenbroek, K. Omarkhali (eds.), *Yezidism: Between Continuity and Transformation*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz): 223–250.

