The Future Of The Yazidi Community

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By

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ABSTRACT

THE FUTURE OF THE YAZIDI COMMUNITY

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This project takes an activist approach to the short and long-term issues of the Yazidi community of northern Iraq, now facing geographic separation as a direct consequence of the 2014 ISIS attacks on the Sinjar region. In this thesis, I will discuss the issues that the community faces due to geographic separation and how the community's tight-knit belief systems and religious practices have shifted to accommodate the hardships since 2014, and how they may shift in the future. Specifically, this project is an attempt to establish and clarify how the Yazidi community now living in the United States has and is being affected by ISIS's actions in 2014, and the reverberating effects in the community in both the United States and abroad. I claim that the political, economic, and social environment in Iraq, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, brought about international interventions and the growth of organizations like ISIS, which in turn caused the Yazidis not just grave physical harm (and violations of human rights), but also transformations in their identity, beliefs, and practices.

INTRODUCTION: THE YAZIDI COMMUNITY IN IRAQ

The thesis begins with an in-depth description and analysis of the sociopolitical landscape of Iraq prior to the rise of ISIS. From there, a discussion of who the Yazidi community is - their beliefs, culture, and common misconceptions and resentments about their beliefs - and how those factors influence their status within Iraqi society. The third chapter discusses the attacks on the Yazidi population in Sinjar, Iraq in August 2014. Chapter 4 accounts the fall of ISIS in Iraq and its immediate effects on the Yazidi community, the current socio-political climate in Iraq following ISIS, and explores the current status of the Yazidi community. Chapter 5 takes an activist approach to discussing current and future lines of effort needed for the rehabilitation of the Yazidi community.

The Yazidi community is a small ethno-religious minority primarily located in Iraq. The Yazidis primarily live in the Sinjar region of Iraqi Kurdistan, an area of Iraq that is contested between the Government of Iraq in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Yazidis follow an ancient religion, distinct from any other religion in the world. Due to their unique views, the Yazidis have faced persecution since their inception and growth around the 13th century, and that history of persecution and targeting lends to their status in Iraq today.

In 2014, ISIS attacked the Yazidi community in Sinjar several months after

seizing Mosul, Iraq. The United Nations declared ISIS's actions a genocide after a

thorough review of the situation in 2016. ISIS committed heinous crimes against the

Yazidis, but their main intent was to completely wipe out the Yazidi religion and

community from existence, utilizing sexual slavery, mass murder, rapes, and the

conscription of child soldiers in the attempt to carry this out.

Statement of Research

The objective of my research thesis is to explore the nuanced faith and belief

systems of the Yazidi community, and explore the issues that the diaspora living in the

United States is facing, particularly the reverberating effects that geographic separation

has caused since the ISIS attacks in 2014. In the end, I was able to draw conclusions on

the outlook of the Yazidi community from the perspective of Yazidis who are living in

the United States, as well as leaders in Yazidi non-profit organizations and experts on the

Yazidi community in Iraq.

Through this research, I hope to use the framework that media coverage, texts,

and narratives about ISIS's effects on the Yazidi community provide to expand on the

research on this subject, and attempt to flesh out where the priorities in reconstruction

and rehabilitation of the Yazidi community should lie. I claim that the political,

economic, and social environment in Iraq, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, brought

about international interventions and the growth of organizations like ISIS, which in turn

caused the Yazidis not just grave physical harm (and violations of human rights), but also transformations in their identity, beliefs, and practices.

Review of Literature

In order to mitigate the limited number of sources on the Yazidi community, I utilized a broad array of literary genres for this research. Scholarly research on the Yazidis, particularly in English, is sparse due to the historical persecution of this community, their small numbers, and their relative isolation from their neighbors that lends to a form of silence in the research done on the Yazidi community and other religious minorities in Iraq. Additionally, some texts that may be referencing Yazidis are difficult to declare with certainty because many of the texts that discuss the history and geopolitical climate in Iraq do so while lumping minorities such as the Yazidis, Christians, Mandaeans, Shabaks, etc.[1] under one umbrella, or including the Yazidis under the generalized umbrella of the Kurds.

The attacks by ISIS in 2014 triggered a great amount of Western interest in the Yazidi genocide, and a great amount of research and journalism was conducted by Western scholars on the effects that the attacks by ISIS had on the Yazidi community.[2][3][4][5][6]

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[1] Robertson, John F. *Iraq: A History.*John Robertson explains this phenomenon in his text *Iraq:* A History. On page 30, he states "Today, accounts of current events in Iraq are couched in very broad ethnic and religious categories. Journalists and commentators tend to lump Iraqis into general categories such as Shi'ite Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds. The minority Turkmen and, until recently, Yazidis and Mandaens have received only occasional mention. Iranians, including Persians, are also mentioned as a presence in Iraq, often as outsiders whom some Iraqis perceive as a threat."
[2] McCants, William Faizi. *The ISIS Apocalypse.*
[3] Warrick, Joby. *Black Flags: the Rise of ISIS.*
[4] Stern, Jessica, and J.M. Berger. *ISIS: the State of Terror.*

[7][8] The shortfall with much of this research, however, is that there is almost an exclusive focus on Yazidi women and girls that were held captive under the so-called caliphate, silencing the abuses of men and boys that also suffered at the hands of ISIS. Johanna Foster from Monmouth University's Department of Political Science and Sociology and Sherizaan Minwalla, from American University's International Human Rights Law Clinic, published an article in the Women's Studies International Forum on the topic of journalistic practices in the reporting of ISIS sexual violence.[9] Foster and Minwalla state that "Islamic State abuses were many, but the significant media attention focused on sexual violence against women and girls, far exceeding reporting on other crimes against men and boys, or the underlying factors that contributed to the conflict."[10] The trends of Orientalism are interwoven throughout this research, perpetuating an apocalyptic view of ISIS, and a polarizing view of the Yazidi community as meek and delicate in comparison. In fact, one of the texts that outlines the rise of ISIS and its vision, although filled with insight into the motivations of ISIS, is entitled *The ISIS Apocalypse: the History,*

[5] Arraf, Jane. "'I Want To Go Back': The Yazidi Girls Who Did Not Want To Be Rescued From ISIS."

[6] Mercer, Phil. "Persecuted Yazidis Find Sanctuary in Australia."

[7] Louisa Loveluck, Mustafa Salim. "Yazidi Women Raped as ISIS Slaves Face Brutal Homecoming Choice: Give up Their Child or Stay Away."

[8] The Sun. "The Moment ISIS Sex Slaves Are Reunited with Yazidi Relatives."

[9] Foster, Johanna E., and Sherizaan Minwalla. "Voices of Yazidi Women: Perceptions of Journalistic Practices in the Reporting on ISIS Sexual Violence."

[10] Foster, Johanna E., and Sherizaan Minwalla. "Voices of Yazidi Women: Perceptions of Journalistic Practices in the Reporting on ISIS Sexual Violence."

Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State,[11] which sensationalizes ISIS and makes them seem like a threat that is impossible to diminish or defeat.[12]

The politicization of the Yazidi genocide also perpetuated a culture of Orientalism by triggering research on the Yazidi women as sex slaves solely within the context of their captivity under ISIS. One interview participant stated "Did anybody want to listen? Of course they did because they wanted to make a documentary out of it."[13] This resulted in ethically questionable media coverage and interviews of the events that have had negative impacts on the Yazidi community, and potentially led to a further stigmatization of the women and girls that were held in sexual slavery.[14] Foster and Minwalla explored these journalistic practices, and brought to light the sensationalism and questionable reporting methods on the 2014 attacks by ISIS.

Orientalism and The Validity of Sources on Yazidis

Much of the ethnographic work done pertaining to the Yazidi community was written in a small window in the late 1800s and early 1900s, a time when Orientalism

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[11] McCants, William. *The ISIS Apocalypse.*

[12] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism.* It would be unwise for Western scholars to view ISIS through a lens of Judeo-Christian values, in which analyzing a horrible force like ISIS portends or fulfills the Christian prophecy of the Apocalypse. It would also be unwise to view ISIS, a group that is generally considered to be horrible and atrocious and violent, through this lens because it makes them seem almost untouchable, as if there is no solution to the problem of extremism and ISIS. Viewing through this lens also perpetuates the Orientalist ideas of "otherization", and helps ISIS accomplish their goal of being seen as unstoppable. What Edward Said stated about Orientalism is still being perpetuated in western scholarship on ISIS today: "In newsreels or news-photos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures represent mass rage and misery, or irrational (hence hopelessly eccentric) gestures. Lurking behind all of these images is the menace of jihad. Consequence: a fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world."

[13] Clements. "Participant 2."

[14] Foster, Johanna E., and Sherizaan Minwalla. "Voices of Yazidi Women: Perceptions of Journalistic Practices in the Reporting on ISIS Sexual Violence."

was highly prevalent in Western scholarship. Orientalism is a characterization of literature designated by patronizing representations of the East by Western scholars.[15] Said stated that "The Orient and Islam have a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work."[16] Given this, historical ethnographic sources on the Yazidi community (and other cultures in the area commonly referred to as the "Middle East") must not be taken directly at their word, but questioned and re-evaluated in light of current ethnographic works and studies, and considered through the lens of known biases that Western scholars had/have towards cultures in the commonly referred to 'Middle East'. That is not to say that the data collected, the experiences described, and the work done by these scholars is completely irrelevant to understanding the Yazidi culture and community. Much can be learned through these works, if one is patient with the material enough to sort through the weeds of biases, re-evaluate these texts with an attempt to remove the biased perspectives, as closely as possible to objective truth.

The procurement and validity of the two Yazidi ancient texts referenced in this research (Ketāb al-jelwa and the Meṣḥefa reš) is mysterious. According to Christine Allison, an author in Encyclopedia Iranica, in the early 20th century, around ½ a dozen

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[15] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism.*
[16] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism.*

manuscripts claiming to contain ancient Yazidi texts made their way to the West. A

Christian monk named Jeremiah Shamir, who dealt in books and manuscripts, was

involved in their appearance. It is unclear exactly where these texts came from or who

they came from, but their sudden appearance in the 20th century is mysterious given that

the community was incepted around the 11th or 12th century, and the trend of Orientalist

work about the Yazidi community in this time due to the misconception that they were

"devil-worshippers".[17]

  According to Encyclopedia Iranica, "An anonymous publication (known to be by

A. N. Andrus) in 1891 contained the first verbatim translations of passages from the

Ketāb al-jelwa and the Meṣḥefa reš. The first full translation, by Edward G. Browne

appeared in 1895. In 1909, Isya Joseph published the Arabic text of both Ketāb al-jelwa

and Meṣḥefa reš, with an English translation. Two years later, in 1911, the Carmelite Père

Anastase-Marie de Saint-Elie announced his discovery of what he believed to be the

original Kurdish version of the texts. This was written in an otherwise unknown alphabet

that bore no obvious resemblance to any other Middle Eastern script, but strangely had

separate characters representing Arabic emphatic consonants which do not normally

occur in Kurdish. Father Anastase showed his find to the Austrian orientalist Maximillian

Bittner, who published the texts in 1913 with a German translation. Bittner had access to

Oskar Mann's work on the Mokri dialect of Kurdish, but was evidently unfamiliar with

other forms of the language. On the basis of this limited knowledge, he declared the

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[17] Allison, Christine. "Yazidis: General."

Kurdish of these texts to be ancient and obviously regarded Father Anastase's texts as authentic...A few years later this view was challenged by Alphonse M Ingana, who gave a number of cogent arguments[18] to suggest that these finds did not represent an ancient manuscript tradition. Mingana claimed that the texts were forgeries made by Jeremiah Shamir. At a later stage, Cecil John Edmonds[19] pointed out that the Kurdish of the "sacred books" was not Kormānji, but the Sōrāni of the Arbil region, that is, the dialect of Kurdish spoken by Shamir. To these arguments, one might add the very words of Ketāb al-jelwa, where Ṭāwusi Malek asserts: 'I teach without a scripture.'"[20][21]

Given this, I find it difficult to believe that the texts are original Yazidi texts. It seems to me that they may have been forged or reproduced by Shamir or one of his allies. Because of the conflicting origin stories of these texts, and the controversy over whether they exist at all, we must be careful when contextualizing the Yazidi faith within these written texts. We must be careful not to come to conclusions strictly off of these texts, but to only use them as a framework for potential comparison with actuated beliefs and practices of the community in history and in the modern world.

Research Questions

The research questions that I have attempted to answer through this project are as follows:

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[18] I am unsure what these arguments against the notion that these texts were ancient manuscripts were.
[19] C.J. Edmonds, *A Pilgrimage to Lalish*, London, 1967.
[20] J. S. Guest, *The Yezidis: A Study in Survival.*
[21] Allison, Christine. "Yazidis: General."

What are the core beliefs of the Yazidi faith?[22]: I asked this question in order to get a grasp on the basic beliefs of the Yazidi community and explore the ways in which those beliefs differ from the majority (i.e., Islam) and other minorities in Iraq (i.e., Christians).

How has the attempted genocide by ISIS affected/altered/enhanced Yazidi religious beliefs, if at all?: I wanted to determine how the Yazidi religion had been affected by ISIS's actions. Naturally, religions change over time, but I wanted to determine how a significant event like an attempted genocide and the reverberating effects would impact the religion of a minority population like the Yazidis. Did the Yazidis retaliate against ISIS's brutal ideology by strengthening their religious ties to Yazidism, or would fear of continued persecution push Yazidis further from their faith?

How do the religious beliefs of the Yazidis affect their relationships with other populations in Iraq?[23] How have these relationships shifted over time? The attack on the Yazidis by ISIS already demonstrates that their relationships with other Iraqi groups is tense, but were there tensions and resentments against the Yazidis (from non-extremists) that created a platform for ISIS to build their loathing of the Yazidis from? In other

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[22] Given the limited publications on the Yazidi faith in English, it is necessary to first establish a baseline of
core Yazidi beliefs from which to build off of. This was in no way intended to be an exhaustive narrative on specific Yazidi religious beliefs and practices, especially with such a small sample, and much more ethnographic work is needed to draw conclusions on specific religious beliefs. This purpose of this question was merely to establish a baseline from which to compare potential shifts in beliefs from.

[23] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yezidi Women and the Islamic State*. Otten mentions tensions between the Sunni Muslim community, the Peshmerga forces, and the Yazidis leading up to and in the aftermath of the genocidal attacks on ISIS. These communities lived in proximity relatively peacefully leading up to the events - my intent here is to understand the distrust that occurred/is occurring between the Yazidis and these other Iraqi population groups.

words, did the socio-political isolation and resulting perseuction of the Yazidis lead to the attempted genocide by ISIS?

How has the Yazidi faith changed since the attempted genocide, if at all? How has the Yazidi social system shifted since the attempted genocide, if at all?: These questions were aimed at discovering how the Yazidi religious leadership, and in turn the Yazidi community, has adjusted in response to the attacks in 2014.

What are the beliefs of the diaspora regarding the future outlook for the Yazidi community as a whole and as individuals?: This question seeks to explore how members of the Yazidi community see their future and the community's future in Iraq and abroad. It also seeks to gain insight into how the Yazidis are prioritizing rehabilitation efforts.

How has the Yazidi population in the United States been affected by geographic separation?[24]: Particularly for a community that has historically been isolated in rural Iraq, the geographic separation caused by a large exodus of members from the community in Iraq to the United States (in very small numbers[25]) and other locations,

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[24] The Yazidi community is notably secluded from the rest of society in the sense that they are a very
'closed-off' community with a history of persecution and no true religious allies. Additionally, the societal
and religious structure of the Yazidi community prevents marriage and child-bearing outside of the
community. My intent is to explore how these systems have been impacted and if the community is more
or less open to outsiders in the aftermath of the attacks by ISIS, and to what degree these systems have been impacted. Is opening the self-imposed barriers to entry to the community necessary for long term survival? Have the attacks made the community even more closed off to outsiders?
[25] Clements. "Participant 2." The United States has offered refuge to very few Yazidis after the attacks by ISIS in 2014, and given that there is a very small number of programs for Yazidis in the United States. "America is the country that got the least number of Yazidis. There are only a few of them. They don't get that help, okay. And even when they came as refugees, they don't take

such as Germany and the Netherlands, caused inevitable shifts in the day-to-day functioning of the community. This question was aimed at the community in the United States, but in the interviews the questions were answered more generally.

What are the short term and long term issues that the Yazidi community as a whole is facing due to geographic separation, specifically pertaining to dwindling population levels, maintaining religious practices and traditions, maintaining contact with loved ones in Iraq, and coping with the trauma endured due to the attacks by ISIS?: Finally, I asked the participants more generally about their concerns for the future of the Yazidis in Iraq and abroad. Their insight on these issues helped shape my perceptions on the prioritization of Yazidi rehabilitation efforts.

Who is Included

Given the very small sample of interview participants, it is important to keep in mind that this is not a sample that is totally representative of the Yazidi community as a whole, but rather the interviews have lent perspective on *perceptions* by *some* Yazidis on the collective Yazidi community. The research could be vastly improved with more participant interviews, including interviews with participants in Iraq and Lincoln, Nebraska, and interviews with those that commonly interact with the Yazidi community (for example, Sunni Muslim neighbors in the Sinjar region).

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them as the minority has suffered and need this treatment. No they don't. There are a few of them who came to Arizona and Nebraska...People need a variety of treatments and special attention. If you look at Germany, for example, one of the states in Germany, they took 1,160 people, mostly girls and women taken by ISIS and they have their programs - psychological programs...those that come to the United States...they don't come in in a kind of program that is specialized for them. No, they just come in."

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Included in the research are several Yazidis who relocated in the United States prior to the 2014 attacks. Some of these participants fled Iraq during the Saddam Hussein regime, when Arabization campaigns were an immediate threat to the Yazidis. One participant mainly grew up in Syria given the historical persecution of his family in Iraq, and does not have any childhood memory of Iraq (although his parents lived there for most of their lives). Another participant lived in the Netherlands for most of her life, and became involved in activist efforts on behalf of the Yazidi people after witnessing the Yazidi genocide from afar in 2014. Another participant is a scholar who has conducted a great deal of research on the Yazidi community, and possesses a depth of knowledge on the Iraqi people that I could only hope to approach in many years of research.[26] A couple of the participants have, in the past, provided assistance as translators to the Americans in the early years of the war in Iraq (from around 2003-2007) and as a result, were granted asylum and eventually citizenship in the United States.[27][28] The interview participants were predominantly men (all but one). This research would drastically improve with more female participation. Given the ethical dilemma of interviewing women who were present for the 2014 attacks and those who escaped ISIS captivity (highlighted by Foster and Minwalla[29]), I chose not to interview them at this time to avoid the risk of

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[26]   Clements and Sevdeen. "Participant 1." .
[27]   Clements. "Participant 2." .
[28]   Clements. "Participant 5." .
[29] Foster, Johanna E., and Sherizaan Minwalla. "Voices of Yazidi Women: Perceptions of Journalistic Practices in the Reporting on ISIS Sexual Violence."

retraumatization through telling their stories. The research would be drastically improved

with insights from these women.

Methodology

After receiving approval from George Mason's Institutional Review Board (IRB),

I began conducting research. Throughout August 2019, I compiled documents and

sources including media, texts, publications, etc with which to conduct a literature

review. When analyzing data collected online, I attempted to piece together narratives

that are less sensationalized than a majority of western media portrayals of the Yazidi

community. In order to do this, I relied heavily on accounts and documentaries from

English-speaking Yazidis and translated texts, including those by and about Nobel Peace

Prize recipient Nadia Murad.[30] I utilized documentaries such as *On Her Shoulders*, a film

published in 2018 documenting Nadia Murad's story, to gain insight into the outlook and

concerns of the Yazidi community.[31] I used compiled data to analyze patterns within and

amongst topics, and decide based on relevance which topics and pieces of data were

included in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

I. *Textual Analysis*

The Yazidi community has been an interest of mine since learning of the attacks

on Yazidis during my military duties in 2016. In 2016 and 2017, I provided support to the

U.S. Army during my official duties as part of Combined Joint Task-Force - Operation

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[30] Murad, Nadia. *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight against the Islamic State*.
[31] Bombach, Alexandria, *On Her Shoulders*.

Inherent Resolve, which is the U.S. effort to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria.[32] Given this extended interest in the community, I have conducted casual research on the Yazidis since around that time. I began this course of study at George Mason University in Fall 2018, and have been gathering sources throughout my time in this program with the intention of writing my thesis on the topic of the Yazidi community. Given this, the analysis of some texts were very in depth, while others (especially texts published more recently when juxtaposed to this project did not receive the same amount of attention based on time constraints). That is to say, research on the Yazidi community, and any textual research on the beliefs and practices of any group of people, must be contextualized and re-evaluated again and again in order to fully flesh out the intricacies and nuances in the text, as well as the flaws. Due to that, my research and conclusions may have looked different if the research window was longer.

II.   *Interviews*

From September to October 2019, I recruited and conducted interviews with Yazidis in the Washington, DC/Virginia area, and also interviewed one expert located in Kurdistan over the phone. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, and an interview guide was used. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Although a guide was used, the direction of the interviews themselves were determined by the natural flow of conversation and willingness to discuss certain topics by each participant. I only discussed the genocide if the participant wished to share their

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[32] "Home." *Operation Inherent Resolve*, 2019, www.inherentresolve.mil/.

experiences to avoid retraumatization or undue anxiety and stress that may be associated with the attacks in 2014. I also ensured that the participants understood that they could end the interview at any time without repercussions. Given the traditional roles of men and women and Yazidi society, perhaps the data gathered during interviews may have been different if a male researcher had been present or had conducted interviews without me in the room. The research on Yazidis would likely benefit from a more diverse research team, and that is important to consider in future research endeavors.

III. *Media Review*

Throughout the period from August to October 2019, I gathered media sources on the Yazidis. Additionally, I pulled sources that were published in Western media since the 2014 attacks. A great deal of my insight on western media coverage of Yazidis goes to Sherizaan Minwalla, who provided context by guiding me to an article written by herself and Johanna Foster. This paper discussed media ethics surrounding coverage of Yazidi women and the Yazidi community in general after the attempted genocide in 2014, and was crucial in the formation and organization of my thoughts on the media coverage of the Yazidi community as a whole. Foster and Minwalla contributed much appreciated insight into the sensationalism of the stories of Yazidi women and girls and the silencing of Yazidi men and boys.

Data Analysis

The methodology for this thesis is a conglomeration of several techniques, but my aim was to merge scholarship, activism, and real-world experiences through ethnographic

tools. To do this, I utilized textual-historical analysis, media analysis, and interviews. I have relied upon several historical texts such as Phebe Marr's *The Modern History of Iraq*[33] to give a detailed analysis of the social and political climate in Iraq prior to the rise of ISIS and the Yazidi genocide that followed soon after. I have also utilized Orientalist ethnographic works, as well as interviews conducted with Yazidis living in the United States and an expert in the field (Bayar Mustafa Sevdeen) who has conducted field work focused on Yazidis prior to and after the genocide. Many of the historical textual resources on Yazidis are written by Orientalist scholars, so their analyses should be taken with caution. To mitigate the effects of this, I have also interviewed Yazidis living in the United States in order to gain their perspective and insight and ensure that the voices of actual Yazidi members are heard alongside the context of Orientalist accounts of the Yazidi faith and traditions. In order to document the Yazidi genocide as accurately as possible, I have employed multiple resources, including ethnographic accounts of mainly women and young girls that were taken as ISIS sex slaves, accounts from the United Nations Human Rights Council, personal interviews, documentaries, research of social media and Yazidi non-profit organizations, and news accounts of the genocide. I will draw from Phebe Marr's *The Modern History of Iraq*[34] and John Robertson's *Iraq: A History*[35] to draw conclusions on the current standing of the Yazidis in Iraq; I will also include data from several accounts of the attempted genocide of the Yazidis by ISIS.

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[33] Marr, Phebe. *The Modern History Of Iraq.*
[34] Marr, Phebe. *The Modern History Of Iraq.*
[35] Robertson, John F. *Iraq: A History.*

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CHAPTER 1
WHO ARE THE YAZIDIS?: OVERVIEW AND BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY

The Yazidis are a small ethno-religious minority primarily located in northern Iraq, with small populations in the surrounding countries such as Syria and Turkey, and diaspora communities in Australia, Germany, and the United States. According to Thomas Schmidinger[36], "Iraq constitutes the religious centre of Yazidism and is its traditionally largest settlement area...The region of Shekhan has the most important religious sanctuary in Lalish with the offices and residences of both the Baba Sheikh and the Mîr, the two religious and traditional heads of the Yazidis."[37] Iraq is the heart of the Yazidi faith, containing the most important holy places for Yazidis and a long historical tie to the land of northern Iraq and the Sinjar Mountains.[38]

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[36] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq*. "Thomas Schmidinger is Lecturer for Political Science at the University of Vienna and for Social Work at the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria. He is secretary general of the Austrian Association for Kurdish Studies and co-editor of the Vienna Kurdish Studies Yearbook. His recent books are about Rojava, Afrin, and the Genocide against Yazidis in Sinjar. Foreign Policy advisor on Kurdish issues, minority questions, Middle East for S&D Vice President Josef Weidenholzer in the EU parliament."

[37] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq*.

[38] The Sinjar Mountains have historically been seen as a place of refuge for the Yazidi community during other instances of persecution and genocidal attempts. Sinjar Mountain has been a symbol of safety and endurance for the Yazidi community throughout their long history of attack.

The Yazidis have a distinct set of beliefs, customs, and practices that set them apart from any other religion in the region or in the world. It is important to note that the Yazidi religion is not simply an offshoot or a variation of more prominent religion, such as Islam, Judaism, or Christianity; it is its own religion, which is vital in understanding the relationship between Yazidis and the larger religious populations that make up the social fabric of Iraq. The distinctive characterization of the Yazidis is due to the blending of local syncretic traditions with the traditions and influences of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and ancient Iranian religions (such as Zoroastrianism) over time, as well as a set of customs and traditions that leave the community very isolated and closed off from its neighbors.[39]

Religious Beliefs + Inception

The Yazidi religion has obscure origins, and there are competing theories on how exactly the community was formed. The most plausible theory is that the "name Yazidi is derived from the Persian "Yazdan" or "Yazd, meaning "God" or "Good Spirit", in opposition to Ahriman, the evil principle."[40] Schmidinger explains that "The Yazidi religion is a specific form of monotheism...many of their traditions go back to an age of the ancient Iranian religion, even before the reform of Zarathustra. It seems that some older pre-Zoroastrian forms of this religion survived in the western extensions of the

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[39] "The Yezidi in Syria." *Religious Literacy Project*. "Yezidi beliefs are a syncretic blend of Islamic 'Adawiyya Sufism, pre-Islamic Kurdish religion, and Zoroastrianism, strongly influenced by the 12th century Sufi mystic Sheikh 'Adi ibn Musafir (d. 1160/1162)."

[40] Admittedly, my sources on the Yazidi religion and belief systems are sparse. Unfortunately, the literature on the origin and beliefs of the Yazidi community are quite sparse considering the continued violence and persecution that the community has faced historically. I am also limited here in my understanding of ancient Iranian faiths.

Iranian world that are now called Kurdistan. Although the ancient Iranian religion was polytheistic, it already had a chief god of their pantheon that could have developed into the *Xwedê* of Yazidis. Yazidi religion seems to have a common ancestor with Zoroastrianism; however, it is not a direct offspring of Zoroastrianism. Rather both have roots in an earlier form of Iranian religion and developed from Iranian polytheism into two different forms of monotheism."[41]

Cathy Otten describes the Yazidi beliefs, claiming that Yazidis believe that the universe was created by God from a pearl that gave out light and water. God then created seven holy beings, similar to angels, who were in charge of making Earth (beginning with Lalish). The chief of the seven angels is Melek Tawuse, commonly referred to as the peacock angel. Lalish is not only significant due to the Yazidi belief that the creation of the earth began there, but Lalish is also the location of shrines dedicated to Sheikh Adi and several other real historical figures who have now become mythic.[42][43][44] These mythic beliefs have impacted how the Yazidis relate to their beliefs, and even the genocide in 2014, today. According to the same ethnographic source on the modern Yazidi community, "Yazidi refugees first arrived in Sinjar in the early Ottoman period due to persecutions farther east near the town of Sheikhan where the group's religious leaders

[41] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq*.
[42] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yezidi Women and the Islamic State*.
[43] "The Yezidi in Syria." *Religious Literacy Project*.
[44] Allison, Christine. "Yazidis: General."

are based. A stone tablet at the Sharaf al Din temple on Sinjar Mountain dates its

foundations to the late thirteenth century."[45]

The importance of the origins of the Yazidi community is crucial in understanding

their place in modern Iraq and the historical accounts of persecution that the community

has faced. Given the blending of what began as orthodox Sufi beliefs in the early 12th

century with local traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, the

Yazidis grew further from the orthodox versions of Islam as time went on, and formed as

its own distinct religion and belief system, separate from its influencing religions. As the

Yazidi belief systems continued to stray from traditional Islamic norms in the 13th and

14th centuries, the community grew and they began to wield more political power and

geographical influence. "The geographic spread and political power of the Yazīdīs

continued to increase in the 13th and 14th centuries, while their belief system continued

to develop away from Islamic norms. By the early 15th century, surrounding Muslim

rulers had begun to view them as apostates and rivals for political power, and clashes

ensued. As the power of the Yazīdīs waned, their numbers were reduced by massacres

and conversions, both voluntary and forced. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw

significant numbers flee to the Caucasus[46] to avoid persecution. Most of the Yazīdī

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[45] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yezidi Women and the Islamic State*.
[46] Cogan, Killian. "History Repeating: Yazidis Find Haven Once More in Caucasus." *Alaraby*, The New Arab.
"In the Caucasus...Yazidis first settled as a result of Ottoman oppression in the second half of the 19th century. Originally inhabiting the eastern provinces of Anatolia, Yazidis became victims of ethnic cleansing efforts carried out by the late Sultan Abdul Hamid against non-Muslim minorities. Most migrated to Armenia where they now make up the country's largest minority, numbering around 30,000. Armenia's Yazidis are well integrated and maintain strong ties with their Christian neighbours."

community in Turkey emigrated to Germany in the second half of the 20th century."[47] The political implications of being a distinct religious group in the 13th and 14th centuries allowed the Yazidis to establish themselves distinctively in the region and draw them out from under the umbrella of other more widely accepted religions. However, as this political power shifted back to majority groups, those in power attempted to force the Yazidis to conform to established norms in order to reconsolidate power and influence in the region.

Regarding the Yazidis' origins, I have put my trust in the works of scholars with much more institutional knowledge on the community. I am sure that there are more extensive sources available in Kurmanji (Kurdish) or Arabic, but for this research I have strictly utilized English sources. Bayar Mustafa Sevdeen is Assistant Professor and researcher at the College of International Studies at the American University of Kurdistan (AUK). He is also a fellow at the Institute of the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University, and is currently working on several projects focusing on Yazidis and other religious groups in the Middle East.[48] Arzu Yilmaz was a Chair of the Department of International Relations at the American University of Kurdistan, and an IPC-Mercator Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).[49] According to Sevdeen and Yilmaz, Yazidism is a monotheistic religion that "combines several aspects of other religions such as Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The

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[47] Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. *Encyclopedia Britannica.* 22 February 2018.
[48] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq.*
[49] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq.

essentialist form of Yazidism, however, is basically driven by the narratives of massacres

that took place throughout history. The literature speaks of 72 *Ferman (*massacres)

committed against Yazidis in the past. They have been targeted by violent campaigns

mainly because Muslims regard them as heretical...the Yazidis were targeted not only as

a religious minority, but also as an ethnic Kurdish group. Arabisation of the Yazidis in

Iraq in the 1970s, for instance, was an inseparable component of de-Kurdification of

non-Arab regions."[50] This history of persecution directly affects their mindset and

outlook on the future today, particularly in the context of the attempted genocide by ISIS.

This genocide is not seen as a new event, but as a continuation of historical persecution

that the community has faced for centuries. When considering the Yazidi identity, the

history of persecution within the community is of great importance.

Isolation of Yazidi Community

Theological and legal differences between Islamic and Yazidi beliefs have

resulted in a great deal of misunderstanding and tension between the Yazidis and the

larger religious groups with which it has historically been embedded. Theological and

legal differences have caused many issues for the Yazidis, especially the false perception

that they are "devil-worshippers"[51], a claim that sparked the Orientalist scholarly interest

in the Yezidi community and that is still perpetuated today.[52] Given the historical

misunderstanding of key tenets of the Yazidi faith that began with its inception and

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[50] Yilmaz and Sevdeen. "The Yazidi Quest for Protection in Sinjar in the Post-ISIS Iraq."
[51] Joseph, Isya. *Devil Worship: the Sacred Books and Traditions of the Yezidiz.*
[52] Williams, Brian Glyn. "Who Are the Yazidi 'Devil Worshipers' and Why Is ISIS Trying to Slaughter and Enslave This Ancient Minority? Part One." *HuffPost.*

continues today, the majority groups are left to make assumptions about Yazidi beliefs over which the Yazidis have little control.

Sociological aspects that limit their inclusion in society include cultural practices based on theology, such as the practice of marrying strictly within the Yazidi community (and within that, their own caste). Schmidinger states "Yazidis are strictly endogamous, which has caused many problems when Yazidis fell in love with non-Yazidis...".[53][54] In the context of post-ISIS Iraq, the geographic separation of the Yazidi community is problematic, especially since not only are Yazidis not able to marry outside of the community, but they are not allowed to marry outside of their caste. Schmidinger explains that "The Yazidi society is based on three distinctive groups, who are most of the times called castes in literature, although this terminology is a bit misleading..."[55]. The three castes that Schmidinger references here are the sheikhs, the murids, and the pirs. These three Yezidi groups each hold specific roles in the community and are supposed to only marry within their own group.

Schmidinger also details notable individuals within the Yazidi society, which one might call the Yazidi religious leadership.[56] Schmidinger states "Besides these three

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[53] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq.* Page 171. Here Schmidinger is referencing the murder of Dua Khalil Aswad, a seventeen year old Yazidi girl who was murdered by her own family after falling in love with a Muslim man.
[54] "Radio 4 Woman's Hour - Honour Killings in Iraq." *BBC*.
[55] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. Schmidinger explains further that "Unlike Hindu castes in India, the Yazidi castes are not necessarily strictly hierarchical. Instead, they constitute different functions in society. Nevertheless, these three castes, the murids, sheikhs, and pirs, are only supposed to marry within their own group."
[56] In the *Reconciliation* portion of Chapter 5, these individuals and their appointed representatives are collectively referred to as "religious leadership" and/or "community leadership".

groups [sheikhs, murids, and pirs], there are also subgroups and specific religious notables."[57] He explains the role of the Prince (Mir), who is the political/social leader of the community. Another important position in Yazidi society is the Baba Sheikh, who is the community's spiritual leader. The Baba Sheikh is the highest spiritual authority within the Yazidi community. Both the Mir and the Baba Sheikh are based on hereditary prerequisites, meaning that they must be from a specific branch of a specific family.

The Yezidis are also separated linguistically and ethnically from the majority of Iraq, given their status (or perceived status) as both Kurds[58] and as members of the Yazidi community. This separation adds another layer to the tensions between Yazidis and other groups within Iraq. Another key factor in their separation from state membership is their historical and current resistance to "Islamization" that became prevalent under the regime of Saddam Hussein. The community as a whole is isolated in many ways - ethnically, linguistically, theologically - and has been tirelessly persecuted for many years because of this isolation.

Participant 3 stated that "The reasons why Yazidis become the target of ISIS is it's a totally different religion...in the eyes of Islam, the Yazidis are not 'People of the Book'." *Ahl al-Kitab,* or "People of the Book" within Islamic thought refers to religions that contain a divine book.[59] *Ahl al-Kitab* were afforded privileges that those without a

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[57] Sevdeen and Schmidinger.
[58] Some Yazidis would not consider themselves Kurdish, but majority groups within Iraq do consider them to fall under the Kurdish umbrella. There will be further discussion on this topic in Chapter 6.
[59] Wahyudi, Jarot. "EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE 'AHL AL-KITĀB' VERSES OF THE QUR'ĀN." *Islamic Studies*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1998, pp. 425–443.

divine book did not receive, such as freedom of worship during the early Muslim

conquests. The confusion on whether or not Yazidis do indeed have a divine text has

been a point of contention within the community, and is important to keep in mind when

considering why this group has been isolated and persecuted for so many years.

According to a publication from 1919 by Isya Joseph (a 20th century scholar with

little biographical data)[60], The Yazidis have two sacred texts: Kitâb al-Jilwah (Book of

Revelation) and Mashaf Rêš (Black Book). Joseph claims that "*Al Jilwah* is ascribed to

Šeih 'Adî himself, and would accordingly date from the twelfth century A.D...The *Black*

Book, which perhaps dates from the thirteenth century, is larger than the Book of

Revelation, but is not divided into chapters."[61] *Al Jilwah* is divided into five chapters in

which 'Adî is the speaker. The general makeup of *Al Jilwah*, according to Joseph, is as

follows:

> In the Preface the Šeih says that he existed with Melek Tâ'ûs before the creation
>
> of the world, and that he was sent by his god Tâ'ûs to instruct the Yazidi sect in
>
> truth. In the first chapter he asserts his omnipresence and omnipotence; in the
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> second he claims to have the power to reward those who obey him and to punish
>
> those who disobey him; in the third he declares that he possesses the treasures of

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[60] Joseph, Isya. *Devil Worship: the Sacred Books and Traditions of the Yezidiz. by Isya Joseph*. Boston, 1919. His text, published in 1919, was a translation of other works. He claims in the Introduction that "The Arabic manuscript here translated was presented to me before I left Mosul by my friend Dâud aṣ-Ṣâîġ as a memento of our friendship. Ḥawâja aṣ-Ṣâîġ was a man of culture, in sympathy with western thought, and an intimate acquaintance of M. N. Siouffi, the vice-consul of the French Republic in Mosul. From the first page of the manuscript it appears that through some Yezidis he had access to their literature. I know he was in close touch with many of them, especially with the family of Mulla Ḥaidar, which is the only Yezidi family that can read and guard the sacred tradition of the sect."

[61] Joseph, Isya. *Devil Worship: the Sacred Books and Traditions of the Yezidiz.*

the earth; in the fourth he warns his followers of the doctrines of those that are without; and in the fifth he bids them keep his commandments and obey his servants, who will communicate to them his teachings.[62]

The *Black Book* is not organized into chapters, but "...begins with the narrative of creation: God finishes his work in seven days--Sunday to Saturday. In each day he creates an angel or king (*melek)*. Melek Tâ'ûs , who is created on Sunday, is made chief of all. After that Fahr-ad Din creates the planets, man, and animals. Then follows a story about Adam and Eve, their temptation and quarrel; the coming of the chief angels to the world to establish the Yazidi kingdom; the flood; the miraculous birth of Yezîd bn Mu'awiya; and certain ordinances in regard to food, the New Year, and marriages."[63]

Another account gathered from a Yazidi historian that was interviewed during my research stated that:

> Before Saddam Hussein there were Yazidi holy books...called Black Book. And the reason it's called the Black Book is because when the Mongols invaded the Middle East, there was 7 books. They burned 6 of them. One of them was left. The people that protected them were my tribe. They put it in one of those bread ovens made of clay. The cover generally was made of hide -- deer hide -- it got soot on it like ash -- the cover and turned it to black. They couldn't say the name of the book. Ever since they called it the Black Book. When you ask somebody how that name came along, it's not like the Book of Death. It got its name from the cover that got smeared with ash and turned to black...it was yellow, so they

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[62] Joseph, Isya.
[63] Joseph, Isya.

called it Black Book. Nobody knows where that book is. So far, I've tried to trace

it down to where it's at. Between France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. It's

in one of these countries. They kept it for some reason - they don't share it with

anyone. Do I know why? No I don't know why. But it's written in the old ancient

Yazidi language. And the belief has been passed down orally basically word of

tongue - trying to keep the prayers the same - the history of the nation or the

Yazidi community has been told and passed down generation after generation.[64]

Some Yazidis feel that their texts are being kept from them, which lends to the

perspective of another layer of persecution for the community.

Other scholars and participants in interviews claim that the Yazidis have no

established religious texts, but rely solely on oral tradition to keep their religion alive.

Otten states "Yazidism is an oral religion, passed down through hymns sung by specially

designated singers and the playing of holy instruments. Rather than formal ceremonies,

religious practice involves visiting sacred places and kissing the walls of shrines and

temples. Yazidis participate in baptism and feasts, sing hymns, and recite stories...Some

of the stories are about historical and mythical battles fought in the protection of the

religion. Others, told over the centuries by generations of women, detail methods of

resistance to the same threats that Yazidi women face today."[65] So, was the passing of the

Yazidi faith via oral traditions a response to persecution (i.e., not being able to print or

carry written texts) or merely a tradition that has been carried out over the centuries?

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[64] Clements. "Participant 2."
[65] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yezidi Women and the Islamic State*.

In response to the controversy regarding the existence of a Yazidi holy text, Bayar Mustafa Sevdeen and Thomas Schmidinger sum up their argument in the following quotation:

> The myth of a lost holy book of the Yazidis, the *Meshaf-i Res* (the Black Book) emerged among many Yazidis...some Yazidi sheikhs told me that this book had been stolen by Austrians and that it was in a museum in Vienna. They asked me whether I could advocate for the return of the book to the Yazidis. However, this book neither exists in an Austrian museum nor in the Austrian National Library. The background to this myth is that the Austrian Academy of Sciences published in 1913 a book by the Austrian orientalist Maximilian Bittner entitled 'The Holy Books of the Yazidi or Devil Worshippers'. This relatively small book is based on scriptures of questionable authenticity obtained from Christian neighbours to the Yazidis. Nevertheless, it certainly could not have had the same significance for the Yazidis of the Middle East that the Quran has for Muslims, or the Bible for Jews and Christians, since no Yazidi copies of this 'Holy Scripture' have been preserved. The longing for such an authentic Holy Scripture derives from the desire that their Muslim neighbors recognise them as a 'religion of the book' and thus to be protected."[66]

Other sources point to a potential forgery of the religious texts. According to Encyclopedia Iranica:

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[66] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq.* Page 169.

"Most Yazidi religious texts have been passed on exclusively by oral tradition, and many features characteristic of oral literature can be seen in them. It is now generally accepted that the manuscripts of the Yazidi Sacred Books, the Masḥafā Reš and Ketēbā Jelwa, published in 1911 and 1913, were 'forgeries' in the sense that they were written by non-Yazidis in response to Western travelers' and scholars' interest in the Yazidi religion, amid a general environment of trading in ancient manuscripts. However, the material within these manuscripts is consistent with the contents of the Yazidi oral traditions, and to that extent they may be considered authentic. Nevertheless, it seems that written texts with the titles Masḥefā Reš and Ketēbā Jelwa were known among the Yazidis long before this date, though they have remained unseen even by the vast majority of the community."[67]

The debate over whether or not an established religious text exists or not is indicative of a problem within the Yazidi community. If the lost Black Book that is spoken of by some Yazidis and Orientalist scholars does exist and is not able to be accessed, there may be an issue of an unknown identity that resides in that text. What was/is in that text, where did it come from, and how does/could that text integrate into the recovery of the community in a post-ISIS context, if at all? Another question to ask is if there was a religious text and it has been gone for centuries, how have the oral traditions survived all this time and are they still intact? Additionally, if the text does not exist and these traditions really are solely passed on through oral means, how are those traditions

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[67] Allison, Christine. "Yazidis: General."

protected and preserved in a post-ISIS context when the Yazidi community is more separated, and how has the idea of having a religious text when one does not exist affected Yazidi belief systems?

Sevdeen and Schmidinger's argument that the lack of a Yazidi religious text indicates a lack of significance of the text to the community could be rebutted with the fact that the Yazidis have faced levels of persecution incomparable to other religions, and these waves of persecution that the Yazidis have faced may have resulted in the destruction of Yazidi holy texts and been a factor in the lack of initial production and reproduction of established religious texts. Additionally, the Yazidis may not have recreated the texts out of the interest of protection from persecution in eras of heavy persecution and targeting.

Overview of Early History and Status Under Saddam Hussein's Regime

In order to contextualize this research, it is important to understand the climate in which ISIS rose to power in Iraq and how, as a result, ISIS was able to rise to a level that was such a direct and immediate threat to the Yazidi community. For the purpose of keeping this research manageable, I will be providing a short history of the Yazidi community from its formulation in the 11th and 12th century in order to demonstrate the continuity of persecution and targeting against this group. From there, I will give a short history of the Yazidis since Saddam Hussein's rule in order to provide the reader with an understanding of the status of modern Yazidis and the dangers that the community faces

in a modern context. I will draw from Phebe Marr's *The Modern History of Iraq*[68], John

Robertson's *Iraq: A History*[69], and Schmidinger and Sevdeen's *Beyond ISIS: History and*

Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq[70] to draw conclusions on the current standing of the

Yazidis in Iraq.

The most impactful thread throughout the history of the Yazidis has been the

historical persecution that the community has faced. Thomas Schmidinger states

"Accusations have been repeatedly used since the fifteenth century to justify

persecutions against Yazidis. These persecutions have deeply affected how the

Yazidi people view their own history. Yazidis describe the persecutions and

genocidal acts against them with the Ottoman concept of the firman (decree). Up

until the twentieth century, Yazidis claim to have been the targets of 72 firmans.

Seventy-two represents the mythical number for 'very much'. In the twenty-first

century, when the mythical dimension of this number was no longer known to

most Yazidi people, many Yazidis began to count further and to describe the

attack of 17 August 2007 on two villages in the Sinjar region as the 73rd, and the

genocide of ISIS in August 2014 as the 74th firman."[71]

The aligned political histories of the Yazidis and the Kurds may be a helpful

explanation in understanding why many groups in Iraq still do not separate the two

groups. Yilmaz and Sevdeen state that "...the Yazidis were primarily aligned with the

Kurdish national movements as the 'original/authentic Kurds' that survived despite

[68] Marr, Phebe. *The Modern History Of Iraq.*
[69] Robertson, John F. *Iraq: A History.*
[70] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq.*
[71] Sevdeen and Schmidinger.

centuries of assimilation efforts against the Kurds in the Middle East. In this context, the

Yazidi experience with armed struggle and political mobilisation in the modern realm

was basically shaped within different fractions of Kurdish national movements."[72] In

1979, Saddam Hussein became president of the Iraqi republic. The Iran-Iraq war and its

aftermath resulted in deepening fault lines between various groups in a nation that

already had a weak national identity. The Kurds in the north "...[were] more divisive.

Kurdish loyalty to the state had always been problematic...However, in the first few years

of the war, the Kurds spent more time fighting among themselves than fighting the

government."[73]

Another significant event in the recent history of the Yazidi community is the

prevalent displacement of its members throughout instability in Iraq. Robertson states

"From once being a cradle of religions and exemplar of religious diversity, Iraq between

2003 and 2011 suffered the displacement, exile, and killing of thousands from its other

religious minorities...Also among Iraq's displaced religious communities were hundreds

of members of its ancient Mandaean and Yazidi sects."[74]

The identity of the Yazidi community has been tested throughout history (one of

the interview participants characterized it as 'politicized' and 'ideologized'[75]) and Yazidis

and other religious minorities in Iraq have faced massive pressure to shift their identity to

become more socially acceptable, whether through 'Arabization' campaigns or other

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[72] Yilmaz and Sevdeen. "The Yazidi Quest for Protection in Sinjar in the Post-ISIS Iraq."
[73] Marr, Phebe. *Modern History of Iraq*.
[74] Robertson, John F. *Iraq: A History*.
[75] Clements and Sevdeen. "Participant 1."

forms of pressure from their neighbors. For example, before the attacks in 2014, "You

can also see like, Yazidis were, instead of the hat that they would traditionally wear,

some of them wore all of a sudden black headscarves. This is not something from the

Yazidi community. This is because of the torture and persecution over the years that

people are afraid and dress like the Arab community. Why? So that they don't get judged

when they walk across the street."[76] This pressure is doubled because of their status as a

minority group within a minority group (Yazidis within Kurds). The Yazidi identity itself

was attacked when ISIS began targeting the Yazidis in 2014, as will be discussed in the

next chapter.

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[76]   Clements, "Participant 4." This quote is referring to an almost unspoken societal pressure
placed on Yazidis in Sinjar to assimilate into more of a traditionally 'Arab' identity prior to the
attacks in 2014.

CHAPTER 2: THE RISE OF ISIS

The rise and prevalence of ISIS, although commonly portrayed as a shock by western media, was not as surprising for the people of Iraq. The history of Iraq leading up to the reign of ISIS was tumultuous and filled with uncertainty, and led to many issues that eventually would create fertile ground for extremism to rise and organize in what would become ISIS.

Political and Social Climate Prior to ISIS

The political and social climate in Iraq directly led to the rise of ISIS. Participant 3 stated that "The long-time war[77] created a generation that had nothing. No education. No job. No economy. Nothing. So if you have a generation of these young people, what do they do? They want the easy route to have everything." From this participant's perspective, the motivation for many individuals to join the ISIS ranks was the promise of a better life - the promise of a future, wealth, and power. Particularly in terms of the

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[77] This participant was referencing the United States' military operations in Iraq and the War on Terror.

Yazidi community, the prejudices and resentments that ISIS held against them were not new or shocking, but had been perpetuated (and are still being perpetuated today) for thousands of years by their Muslim neighbors, including those who were not extremists. Schmidinger states "Both Arab and Kurdish Muslims have widespread prejudices against Yazidis. The allegation of devil worship is much more widespread than just within the extremist-jihadist milieu. Most Muslims and Christians often accuse Yazidis of being dirty and not washing themselves...Apart from the cities predominantly inhabited by Yazidis, they could never successfully operate a restaurant or bakery simply because they would not have any customers."[78] These types of prejudices, although they may seem petty or trivial to some, have caused many issues for the Yazidis in regards to interactions with their Muslim neighbors, and have limited their opportunities to increase their own status in society, as demonstrated above. These sentiments have been perpetuated for hundreds of years, so the fact that ISIS used these prejudices as a justification for violence against the Yazidis is not surprising, but speaks to a larger issue within society regarding how Iraq's religious minorities are treated.

Schmidinger makes a very interesting comparison of the anti-Yazidi resentments to anti-Semitic prejudices in nineteenth-century Europe. He states "The anti-Yazidi resentments among Iraq's Muslims and Christians and the crimes of ISIS has a similar relationship to that between the anti-Semitic prejudices in nineteenth-century Europe and the crimes of National Socialism. Not each and every person was an anti-Semite, but

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[78] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq*.

most non-Jews carried some anti-Semitic resentments, which were hegemonic in society. Just like National Socialism only had to systematise, ideologise, and radicalise already existing anti-Semitic resentments, ISIS was also able to build on widespread stereotypes and resentments against Yazidis when they attacked...in 2014."[79] When describing the status of his people now, one interview participant claimed the Yazidis are like "Somebody hand tied from behind and waiting for that sharp object to chop off the head. It's like that."[80] This participant went on to explain that the plight of the Yazidi community was just like that of the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis during World War II, claiming that "not only are they fighting my people physically, but they are fighting my people mentally."[81] There have also been several other narratives by members of the Yazidi community and even Jewish individuals comparing the genocide in 2014 to the plight of the Jews during the Holocaust.[82][83][84][85][86]

The Rise of ISIS

ISIS was not an original group, but a rebranding of an already-violent extremist group that had been present in Iraq years prior to the rise of ISIS.[87] Al Qaeda's founder in Iraq, Musab al-Zarqawi, led the group from the 1990s until his death by a U.S. airstrike in

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[79] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq.*
[80] Clements. "Participant 2."
[81] Clements. "Participant 2."
[82] Kay, Barbara. "Kay: The Yazidis of Today Are the Jews of Yesterday." *The Canadian Jewish News*.
[83] Ahituv, Netta. "'Jews and Yazidis Have a Lot in Common,' Former Yazidi Prisoner of ISIS Says in Israel."
[84] Beardsley, Eleanor. "After Documenting Nazi Crimes, A French Priest Exposes ISIS Attacks On Yazidis." *NPR*, NPR, 18 Mar. 2018.
[85] Johnson, Henry. "U.S. Holocaust Museum: The Islamic State's War On Yazidis Is Genocide."
[86] "The Horror in Northern Iraq." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.
[87] "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State." *Wilson Center*.

2006. The death of al-Zarqawi, a religious extremist hardened and influenced by the

Afghan war, Jordan's Al-Jafr prison, and the teachings of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi[88],

did not destroy the extremist ideology that motivated Al Qaeda in Iraq.[89] Instead, the

organization moved on to become ISIS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. As a recent

article in TIME magazine stated, "It's good to take out the leader, but it's not just a

terrorist group—it's an ideology as well."[90] The transition from Al Qaeda-Iraq to ISIS

was essentially just the rebranding of the organization.

Zarqawi's original establishment of the community in Iraq was a strategic move.

He moved his followers into northeastern Iraq because "Just a few miles from the Iranian

border, a handful of Kurdish villages and towns had attained a precarious autonomy

outside the writ of the Iraqi dictatorship. These Kurdish provinces were protected under

the U.S. no-fly zone established at the end of the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, and

within their boundaries a number of wildly disparate political factions had taken root."[91]

Here he was able to recuperate from the scrutiny and targeting that Al-Qaeda was under

due to the 2001 attacks, and re-establish training camps similar to the ones that he had

previously run in Afghanistan.

Al-Zarqawi's name came to prominence in the Western world in 2003, when

Colin Powell made a case for the Bush Administration's involvement in Iraq, and stated

[88] Al-Saud, Abdullah Bin Khaled. "The Spiritual Teacher and His Truants: The Influence and Relevance of Abu Mohammad Al-Maqdisi."
[89] Warrick, Joby. *Black Flags: the Rise of ISIS*.
[90] https://time.com/5711828/al-baghdadi-dead-isis-future/
[91] Warrick, Joby.

that "Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda lieutenants."[92] This justification, although technically true given Zarqawi's location in the mountains of northeastern Iraq, was misleading in that it insinuated that Saddam Hussein's regime and the Iraqi military were harboring affiliates of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in Iraq, instead of the fact that Iraq was infiltrated by these individuals given the geopolitical circumstances and weakness of the state.[93] Warrick quotes Richer in stating that "The fertile soil was Iraq after de-Baathification...The rain and sunshine was the ineptitude of the provisional authority and U.S. misunderstanding of Iraqis and their culture...All of that allowed Zarqawi to blossom and grow."[94]

Several years later in 2014, Al-Nusrah Front's leader, Zawahiri, disavowed ISIS from the al Qaeda network, and ISIS responded by waging war and beginning fights with al Nusra and several other parties within Syria. ISIS began a strong social media campaign, and "its most immediate effect was to project strength and highlight Nusra's weakness, a perception that became increasingly concrete as ISIS gained ground against its fellow rebels over the next few months."[95]

The Effects of ISIS on the Yazidi Outlook

The ground in Iraq was fertile for extremism, and given the historical persecution of the Yazidis, they seemed expectant that the next attack would occur on the community.

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[92] Warrick, Joby. *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS.*
[93] Warrick, Joby.
[94] Warrick, Joby.
[95] Stern, Jessica, and J.M. Berger. *ISIS: the State of Terror.*

Characteristic of the Yazidi community is a trans-generational collective history of persecution. One participant stated that "The adults give the trauma to their children."[96] Jan Kizilhan, a German-Yazidi professor of psychology and psychotherapy claim that "We call this trans-generational trauma. Because the Yazidis have experienced 74 genocides, this information [on how to survive] is stored in their collective memories….they know their ancestors faced the same thing."[97] Several of the Yazidis that I spoke to claimed that there have been 74 attempted genocides in the Yazidi community since their inception, and their people are at risk of number 75.[98] Cathy Otten also claims that "Yazidis have suffered seventy-four separate genocides, which are remembered in their folklore, including a massacre by the Kurdish chieftain of Rowanduz in 1832, and another by Ottoman Lieutenant General Omar Wehbi Pasha fifty years later when hundreds of Yazidis were killed, villages robbed and destroyed, and the Yazidi prince was forced to convert to Islam."[99] This trauma is passed from generation to generation.[100][101] Even with the rise of modern nation states, and a large shift away from

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[96] Clements. "Participant 4."
[97] Kizilhan, Jan. Quoted by Cathy Otten in *With Ash on Their Faces: Yazidi Women and the Islamic State.*
[98] Clements. "Participant 2." 2019.
[99] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yazidi Women and the Islamic State.* Page 19.
[100] Dossa, Parin. *Afghanistan Remembers: Gendered Narrations of Violence and Culinary Practices.* Univ. of Toronto Press, 2014. Parin Dossa, in *Afghanistan Remembers*, explores a similar phenomenon of passing trauma. She states "Focusing on gendered experiences of displacement and resettlement, I explored the effects of a double moment: trauma/social suffering in the home country and retraumatization in the diaspora accompanied by efforts towards recovery." and "Stories provide flesh and bones to what may otherwise be intangible expressions of pain and suffering. The women know this, and they made many references to how 'people do not know our stories (*quesa haa*) and what we have gone through.' They are clearly aware that others 'cannot imagine how wars have destroyed (*kharaab kardan*) our lives.' It is through memorialized narratives that they relieved disruptive events imprinted in their everyday lives

empirical rule such as that of the Ottoman Empire, protection from the empire/state has never seemed to exist for the Yazidi community, as demonstrated especially in personal interviews conducted for this research.[102] Participant 5 stated that, in his lifetime, "They [Iraq] didn't give us anything. We were always being persecuted." Another participant stated that "We deserve to be protected. But no one is going to protect us because the only one who is going to protect us is the one who started to kill us in the first place...No one in Iraq is going to protect us unless there is international protection."[103] Persecution, for the Yazidis, has been continuous from the time that they were subjects of the Ottoman Empire to modern Iraq, where they are still persecuted from the state and their neighbors.

From the perspective of some Yazidis, the political and social climate before and during the rise of ISIS did not change in any significant way, except that Al Qaeda-Iraq took advantage of the fertile grounds for extremism in Iraq and Syria, and built ISIS from there: "The only thing that's changed is that there was a threat, and now there is action. Al Qaeda turned into ISIS. Only the identity has been changed. The faces are the same." [104] Yazidis also gave accounts of neighboring Sunni villages that took part in the attacks, likely driven not necessarily by ISIS ideology, but perhaps driven by opportunity and

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(*zindagi rozmara*): the Soviet invasion, the civil war, the rise of the Taliban, and the US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan post-9/11."

[101] Kizilhan, Jan Ilhan, and Michael Noll-Hussong. "Individual, Collective, and Transgenerational Traumatization in the Yazidi."

[102] An interesting exploration would be diving deeper into how these issues (persecution, genocide, etc.) have affected the Yazidis' view of their Iraqi national identity.

[103] Clements. "Participant 2."

[104] Clements. "Participant 2."

long-standing resentments and stigmatization towards the Yazidi community.[105][106] During

the interviews, there were several references to the Yazidis as 'sheep' and ISIS as a

'wolf', looming over the Yazidis and ready to attack the Yazidis. One participant stated,

"You have a bunch of lands and sheep...you know there is a wolf, but there is no attack."

[107] Perhaps a more accurate description would be that the historical isolation and

persecution of the Yazidis was the wolf, and the wolf was fed by a geopolitical climate

that fostered extremism and an ideology of hatred towards the Yazidi community based

on resentments entrenched in the minds of the Yazidis' neighbors. These resentments

may have seemed harmless to the common individual, but to ISIS, these resentments

were the fuel behind the genocide.

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[105] Khalek, Rania. "Genocide in Iraq: When Local Sunni Became ISIS and Slaughtered Their Neighbors." Certainly not all of the Yazidis' Sunni neighbors took part in the attacks on Yazidis. Sunnis who refused to submit to ISIS suffered as well. But there have been many accounts of this occurring, and it must be explored deeper in order to mend the Sunni-Yazidi relationship in the Sinjar region.
[106] Tezcür, Güneş Murat. "Analysis | Three Years Ago, the Islamic State Massacred Yazidis in Iraq. Why?"
[107] Clements. "Participant 2."

CHAPTER 3: AUGUST 2014 - ISIS ATTACKS SINJAR

ISIS Sets its Sights on Sinjar

In June 2014, ISIS seized Mosul, a large population center east of Sinjar that

would serve as its stronghold in Iraq at the height of its power. Several months later on

August 2, 2014, the Yazidis were celebrating a holiday marking the end of a fasting

period. According to Otten, "People slaughtered sheep and gathered with their relatives to

celebrate the holiday, handing out sweets and exchanging news and gossip. In the past,

they would have invited their Muslim neighbors to join the celebrations, but more

recently distance had grown between them[108][109][110], leading the villagers to keep mostly on

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[108] Graff, Peter. "Yazidis Fear Annihilation after Iraq Bombings." The distance that had grown between them was due to several attacks that had occurred and the ISIS "warnings" that were given leading up to the attack on 3 August. Cathy Otten describes a series of "warnings" that ISIS had left for the Yazidis, including kidnapping and the slaughtering of several farm animals that were used as symbolic messages for the onset of the August 3, 2014 attacks. For more information on 2007 attacks.

[109] Frantzman, Seth J. "Yazidis Mourn 2014 Genocide and 2007 Terror Attack Anniversaries."

[110] Howard, Michael. "'They Won't Stop until We Are All Wiped out.' Among the Yezidi, a People in Mourning."

their own."[111] The next day, the Yazidis were woken by the sound of gunfire and ISIS fighters entering their villages with little to no resistance.

In the early morning hours of August 3, 2014, ISIS utilized the recently acquired city of Mosul as a center of gravity from which to conduct operations against the people of Sinjar, mainly targeting the Yazidi community and other minorities residing in Sinjar with the hopes of wiping them from existence.[112]Sinjar has historically been home to a large population of Iraq's religious minorities, including Christians, Turkmen, Shabak, Yazidis, and more.[113][114] ISIS attacked Sinjar from several sides, utilizing recently seized swaths of land in Iraq and Syria to conduct a well-organized assault. One interview participant stated that, "In the middle of the night, the Kurds retreated, and ISIS got in. That's how it happened..."If we were Muslim then they would have helped us, but because we are not no one is willing to."[115] ISIS faced little resistance during the attack due to the flight of Kurdish Peshmerga forces at the onset of the assault, the lack of protection and security forces in Sinjar, and the resulting deterioration of the security situation.

Several participants in the interviews also shared details about the lack of preparation and protection that the Yazidis faced in Sinjar. Participant 2 stated that "The betrayal goes on and on...some weapons were given to the Yazidis by the KRG, but the

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[111] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yezidi Women and the Islamic State*.
[112] "United Nations Human Rights Council." *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, 2016.
[113] Mironova, Vera, and Mohammed Hussein. "The Struggle Over Sinjar."
[114] Robertson, John F. *Iraq: A History*.
[115] Clements. "Participant 2."

firing pins were missing. And some hand grenades and RPG rounds were given to the

Yazidis but they were duds. They didn't go off. And many people were killed because of

it."[116] Small, loosely organized Yazidi forces utilized what weapons they could find to

buy time for their families to escape, but the security capabilities of the Yazidis were

minimal in the face of the overwhelming assault by ISIS and the quick retreat of

Peshmerga forces, who left the Sinjar region to reinforce other Peshmerga forces who

were facing ISIS attack.

With very little warning of ISIS' attack on Sinjar, thousands of Yazidis were

displaced and attempting to flee (by vehicle if available, but on foot if not) to Mount

Sinjar by the next morning. U.S.-led Coalition Forces airdropped water and sustenance to

the Yazidis on Mt. Sinjar.[117] Unfortunately, surrounded by ISIS, hundreds of Yazidis,

including young infants and children, died on Mt. Sinjar before the Syrian Kurdish

Forces (YPG) were able to open a safety corridor to transfer the Yazidis from Mt. Sinjar

to safety.[118]

ISIS Treatment of Yazidis Upon Capture

Most Sinjar villages were taken over within 72 hours of the initial assault.

Throughout the whole area, ISIS generally followed an established methodology after

capturing Yazidis. The Yazidis were brutally killed: "with nearly half of them

executed—either shot, beheaded, or burned alive—while the rest died on Mount Sinjar

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[116]   Clements. "Participant 2."
[117] "U.S. Drops New Aid to Iraqis Fleeing Militant Surge."
[118] "United Nations Human Rights Council." United Nations, *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, 2016.

from starvation, dehydration, or injuries during the ISIS siege."[119] One of the interview participants stated that, "In the village of Kocho, there were 700 people lined up and shot in the head."[120] Those who were not killed were subject to torture, forced religious conversion, and sexual slavery.[121][122]

Upon capture, they were separated into three groups: men and boys aged approximately 12 and above, women and children, and boys aged seven and above. Each one of these groups suffered in distinct ways at the hands of ISIS. Men and boys who had already reached puberty were executed. In many cases entire villages of men and boys were killed within hours of the town's capture, either by gunshot or beheading.[123] Participant 2 states "They handcuffed them from behind, they put them in the bed of trucks, and they drove as fast as they could and started tossing them out one after another...And they lined up children on the pavement and started running them over with armored vehicles."[124]

Older men and boys who were not killed and did not convert were taken captive and forced into labor working on ISIS construction projects, and also forced to pray and follow other religious expectations from ISIS. Those who tried to escape were killed.

[119] Valeria Cetorelli , Isaac Sasson, Nazar Shabila, Gilbert Burnham; 09 May 2017; Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey.
[120]   Clements. "Participant 2."
[121] "United Nations Human Rights Council." United Nations, *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, 2016.
[122] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yezidi Women and the Islamic State*.
[123] "United Nations Human Rights Council." United Nations, *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis,* 2016.
[124] Clements. "Participant 2."

Women aged around 60 and older were killed. Gender-based violence was one of the most major crimes by ISIS.[125][126] Participant 2 stated that "A lady from my hometown she was pregnant. ISIS got into the town the first day. They expected her baby in 5 days. Know what they did? They raped her. They cut her abdomen open while she was alive, shot her baby in front of her and then shot her. People who did it are well respected in the KRG."[127] Women and girls age 9 and above were taken to severely overcrowded holding sites where they were registered. Here the ISIS members would come to select and purchase them, and forcibly remove them from their families.[128] Cathy Otten, in *With Ash on Their Faces: Yazidi Women and the Islamic State*, claims that "An estimated 6,383 Yazidis - mostly women and children - were enslaved and transported to ISIS prisons, military training camps, and the homes of fighters across eastern Syria and western Iraq , where they were raped, beaten, sold, and locked away."[129] Numbers of women and girls committed suicide in the holding camps, cutting their wrists and throats, or using their headscarves to hang themselves. ISIS sold the women and girls in slave markets, via online channels, and directly from the holding sites.[130][131]

Once the fighters bought them, women and girls as young as age 9 were subjected to brutal sexual violence, including daily rapes and the threat of gang rape, the killing of

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[125] United Nations, *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, 2016.

[126] "Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes against the Yazidi Community: the Role of ISIL Foreign Fighters." *International Federation for Human Rights*.

[127] Clements. "Participant 2."

[128] United Nations, *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, 2016.

[129] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yezidi Women and the Islamic State*.

[130] United Nations, *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, 2016.

[131] Murad and Krajeski. *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight against the Islamic State*.

their children, and other horrendous punishments if they resisted. They were also beaten by the fighters, and in some cases the wives and children of ISIS fighters participated in the abuse as well.[132]

While younger than 7, young boys were sent to the households of ISIS captors who had bought their mothers. There they were repeatedly forced to endure watching the brutalization of their mothers. They were also abused, beaten by fighters and their families, and psychologically and religiously attacked. When they turned 7, they were forcibly taken from their mothers and sent to ISIS training camps, to be indoctrinated, brainwashed and trained as ISIS fighters, as ISIS attempted to completely negate their identity as Yazidis.[133][134] The communication with their families ceased and they were given a new identity as part of ISIS.[135][136][137]

Yazidi Responses to ISIS Attacks

In response to the attack in Sinjar, the Yazidi community was forced to flee to Mt. Sinjar, and ISIS captured or killed those who were unable to flee in time. Persistent in their attack, ISIS "encircled the mountain on 4 August, tens of thousands of Yazidis remained trapped without water, food, or shelter in temperatures rising above 50°C."[138]

[132] "United Nations Human Rights Council." United Nations, *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, 2016.
[133] Dozier, Kimberly. "What Happens Now to the Child Soldiers of ISIS?"
[134] Dozier, Kimberly. "Yazidi Boys Forced To Be Child Soldiers for ISIS."
[135] United Nations, *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, 2016.
[136] "Surviving ISIS: Young Yazidi Conscripts Begin Long Path to Healing." *The Christian Science Monitor*.
[137] Ferguson, Photographs Adam. "How Does the Human Soul Survive Atrocity?" *The New York Times*.
[138] Valeria Cetorelli , Isaac Sasson, Nazar Shabila, Gilbert Burnham; 09 May 2017; *Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey*. This source consists of fieldwork conducted on the displaced

Other Yazidis were able to escape the Sinjar area. One of the interview participants, who was living in the United States at the time, described the experience of his parents and his younger sibling during the 2014 attacks. On August 2nd, his parents had been attending a Yazidi holiday in Sinjar in which it is customary for Yazidis to visit the graves of loved ones. They were planning on leaving Sinjar on August 3rd and traveling to Turkey, however early on the morning of August 3rd, the attacks ensued and he was alerted of the attacks by Yazidi contacts in Iraq. He lost contact with his family in Iraq for over 12 hours. He described how his father wished to stay and fight with his people. The only reason he did not is because his younger brother refused to leave without him, and told his father that if he was going to stay and fight, they would fight together. His father agreed to leave. These 3 individuals did not have a car in Sinjar, so they got in the car with their cousin and fled on the road out of Sinjar. Due to artillery fire from ISIS militants, the car broke down and they were stuck on the road for a while, but "By a miracle, they figured out what was wrong with the car, they fixed it, and they got out."[139] After that, his parents stayed in Turkey for about a year and then eventually moved to Germany where they live today. This is a common depiction of the Yazidis' response to the attacks by ISIS in Sinjar. Although outnumbered and lacking resources or any substantial preparation, many Yazidis stayed to defend Sinjar.

Yazidi community living in camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The limitations of this work include a small sample size and utilization of rough statistical estimates on the Yazidi community, i.e. an estimate of the number of Yazidis living in Sinjar previous to the attack.

[139] Clements. "Participant 5."

Most Yazidis who were living abroad at the time still maintained contact with their families, friends, and loved ones in Iraq, and were receiving near real-time updates from their loved ones as the attacks were ongoing. This allowed those in the United States in particular to update the U.S. government (and other governments, such as Canada) on the intricacies of the Yazidi genocide and detail exactly what was happening on the ground. Immediately after the ISIS attacks on Sinjar began, Yazidis who had already relocated from Iraq began raising international awareness on the events in Iraq, and lobbying with the international community to stop the attacks in Sinjar and assist the Yazidi community.

Participant 5 stated that "We were taking days off work to go to the State Department, to the White House, just to raise awareness. The attack happened on the 3rd. We were at the State Department on the 4th. A couple of days later we were at the White House. We met with the National Security Advisor to President Obama back then. We were very active. We are still active."[140] The genocide of the Yazidis sparked an onset of activism within the community, which was actually a continuation and expansion of activist work that had been going on in the United States since around 2007, an example being the establishment of the American Yazidi Center in Washington, D.C., which sought to educate the international community (particularly Americans) on the Yazidi people and their culture in hopes of addressing the anti-Yazidi sentiments that had been brewing in Iraq for hundreds of years. Some establishments for the advocacy of the

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[140] Clements. "Participant 5." .

Yazidi community worldwide include Yazda, Nadia's Initiative, and the Free Yezidi Foundation.[141][142][143] Additionally, Nadia Murad became a symbol for the Yazidi people and now works as an activist, resulting in her becoming a Nobel Peace Prize recipient in 2018, and continuing to raise awareness of the plight of the Yazidis through her work at the United Nations as the Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking[144] and via documentaries such as *On Her Shoulders*.[145][146]

In the time since ISIS has been militarily defeated in Iraq and the tides of war have waned a bit, there have been efforts at reconstructing the community in Sinjar and recovering from the damages that ISIS inflicted. When the Peshmerga forces fled, some Yazidi women mobilized to protect their homeland and their people, fulfilling a role traditionally filled by the state's military or security forces.[147] There are now established female "resistance units," which are offshoots of mixed-gender Yazidi militias formed in 2007 called the Sinjar Resistance Units.[148] Additionally, transnational networks such as

[141] "Global Yazidi Organization." *Yazda*, www.yazda.org/.
[142] "Nadia's Initiative – Advocating for Victims of Sexual Violence and Rebuilding Communities in Crisis."
[143] "Home Page." *Free Yezidi Foundation*, www.freeyezidi.org/.
[144] "Goal of the Month | Exclusive Interview with Nadia Murad, Nobel Peace Prize Winner and Goodwill Ambassador - United Nations Sustainable Development."
[145] "The Nobel Peace Prize 2018." *NobelPrize.org*, 2018.
[146] Bombach, Alexandria, director. *On Her Shoulders*.
[147] Moroz, Sarah. "The Women Taking on ISIS: on the Ground with Iraq's Female Fighters." *The Guardian*.
[148] Maltz, Judy, et al. "Middle East Updates / Iran: Willing to Help with Islamic State - after Nuclear Talks Progress."
"A militia of Iraq's minority Yazidis Thursday killed at least 22 fighters from the militant Islamic State group in clashes in the northern town of Sinjar, a member of the militia said. A force from the Yazidi group, Malik al-Tawus (King Peacock), clashed with Islamic State insurgents in Sinjar, west of the rebel-held city of Mosul, and killed 22 of them, militia spokesman Khudida al-Haskani, told independent Iraqi site Alsumaria News....Malik al-Tawus is a self-defense group, believed to have been set up in 2007 to protect the Yazidi community in Iraq against attacks by radical Islamists."

Yazda have formed with the purpose of making the international community aware of what occurred within the community and how it will affect generations to come.[149] This organization in particular has led protest efforts in front of the White House in Washington, DC. Other organizations, such as the Free Yezidi Foundation, seek to assist in psychological rehabilitation, livelihood training, and education of Yazidi women and children, global advocacy for the Yazidi community, justice projects that attempt to bring ISIS perpetrators to justice.[150] One interview participant who has an active role in this foundation stated that "Without women having a voice in the community, there will always be inequality. There will always be a lack of representation...it's not good...so we are focusing on strengthening women. Politically, in their rights, education, everything. And at the same time, give those most severe cases psychological treatment so that they can get back on their feet."[151] The Free Yezidi Foundation is also expanding its reach into addressing gender-based violence and other issues, according to an interview participant. [152]

[149] "Global Yazidi Organization." *Yazda*, www.yazda.org/.
[150] "Home Page." *Free Yezidi Foundation*, www.freeyezidi.org/.
[151] Clements. "Participant 4."
[152] Clements. "Participant 4." .

CHAPTER 4: THE FALL OF THE "CALIPHATE" AND POST-ISIS IRAQ

The city of Sinjar was reclaimed by Kurdish forces in 2015.[153] Otten states "Sinjar

was retaken by Kurdish forces backed by coalition air strikes in November 2015. The

cost of its liberation was its near total destruction. The majority of Yazidis are still unable

to return because of ruination, and because they fear new clashes between the Kurdish

militias who retook the area from ISIS, and were, at the time of writing, fighting with

each other for control."[154] According to a New York Times article published immediately

after Sinjar was liberated, "Kurdish and Yazidi fighters retook the northern Iraqi city of

Sinjar from Islamic State fighters on Friday morning, facing only pockets of resistance as

the jihadists cleared out from a town they had brutally dominated for more than 15

months."[155] Unfortunately, the destruction in Sinjar was so vast that much of the city was

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[153] Gordon, Michael R., and Rukmini Callimachi. "Kurdish Fighters Retake Iraqi City of Sinjar
From ISIS."
[154] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yazidi Women and the Islamic State.* Page 17.
[155] Gordon, Michael and Callimachi, Rukmini. "Kurdish Fighters Retake Iraqi City of Sinjar from
ISIS."

in shambles, and many homes were unlivable due to traps that ISIS had set up. There are still very recent reports of deaths attributed to demining efforts in Sinjar.[156][157]

Aside from destruction and lack of infrastructure, the Yazidi community has not had a real sense of closure from the genocide, particularly due to the mass graves. One participant stated "The other thing that I want to mention for Yazidis - what do they need? Those mass graves. They need to go in and do forensic labs, DNA testing. Because, imagine...like Nadia Murad, for example. The Nobel Peace Prize Winner. She lost maybe 10-12 family members...I'm not sure how many. But I mean, all of those mass graves - how are they going to identify who is who and what is what? So I think a forensic lab is important too."[158] Having closure and knowing the fate of their loved ones will aid the Yazidis in shifting their focus to actually finding those who are still missing and bringing them home, and truly grieving for those who were killed by ISIS and buried in mass graves.

Iraq (and Sinjar specifically) is still unstable and has not addressed the issues of sectarian violence, extremism, and the protection of religious minorities.[159] In terms of the Yazidis, there is no trust between the state of Iraq, the autonomous Kurdistan region, and the Yazidi community. Security, fair representation in the government, and corruption are issues that have plagued Iraq for years, and these issues do not seem to be

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[156] "Feature: 5 Years after IS Atrocities, Young Yazidis Team up to Clear Explosive Hazards in Northern Iraq." *Xinhua*.
[157] *Mixed Yazidi Teams in Sinjar: Bringing Women and Men at the Frontlines of Clearance Efforts in Iraq*. UNMAS Iraq, 2019.
[158] Clements. "Participant 5."
[159] Kube, Courtney. "'Defeated' ISIS Has Found Safe Haven in an Ungoverned Part of Iraq." *NBCNews.com*.

lessening in the time since ISIS has been declared defeated. In the same New York Times article, conflicting political and ethnic tensions surrounding the liberation of Sinjar were apparent, in that "...even as the American-backed offensive appeared to have secured its goals after just two days, divisive political issues came to the forefront."[160] As discussed in Chapter 5, political disagreements and competitions for political influence are factors that play into the lack of desire for Yazidis to move back to Sinjar. The political and strategic importance of Sinjar for its many different stakeholders is important in understanding post-ISIS Iraq's Yazidi population.

For example, Sinjar has been wrangled over by the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. This could be seen in the differing narratives published after Sinjar's liberation. Journalists Gordon and Callimachi stated that "The head of the Iraqi Kurdish government, President Masoud Barzani, held a news conference on Mount Sinjar to hail the retaking of the town and made clear that it would formally be incorporated into Kurdistan — a troubling development for the Iraqi government in Baghdad, which considers Sinjar an Iraqi-administered city."[161] Yet another faction claimed the victory in the recovery of Sinjar - the PKK, and stated that the American-backed Kurdish peshmerga forces did not actually liberate Sinjar at all. According to Gordon and Callimachi, "After weeks of efforts by the Kurdistan government to sideline the P.K.K. during the Sinjar campaign, the rival fighters bitterly

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[160] Gordon, Michael and Callimachi, Rukmini. "Kurdish Fighters Retake Iraqi City of Sinjar from ISIS." The New York Times.
[161] Gordon, Michael and Callimachi, Rukmini. "Kurdish Fighters Retake Iraqi City of Sinjar from ISIS."

insisted that they had in fact led the fighting — not just on Friday, but for months. 'We have been fighting in this city for 15 months,' said a fighter who went by the nom de guerre Adil Haroon, explaining that the P.K.K. had come to the Yazidis' aid immediately after the ISIS takeover in August 2014, as the peshmerga were leaving. 'We fought. They don't fight. Now they say that we should leave. They were with us when we took the city but didn't bother to get out of their cars.'"[162]

The competing political powers in Sinjar is mainly due to the strategic and symbolic significance of the region, as discussed previously. For ISIS, Sinjar was vital to maintaining its supply lines between its two strongholds (in 2015), Mosul, Iraq and Raqqah, Syria. According to an Associated Press article published in 2015 stated that "Sinjar is important because of Highway 47, which lies alongside the town and links the Islamic State group's two biggest strongholds — Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in northern Iraq. The 120 kilometer (75 mile) -long highway has been one of the most active supply lines for IS, a major conduit for goods, weapons and fighters."[163] By regaining Sinjar, the Kurdish fighters were able to cut off ISIS logistics routes between Mosul and Sinjar, and estimate and plan for upcoming battles with ISIS, such as those in Tal Afar and Mosul.[164] [165]

More generally speaking, Sinjar's location is significant in understanding its strategic significance to different stakeholders in Iraq. It is part of the Ninewah province,

[162] Gordon and Rukmini.
[163] "A Look at the Iraqi Town of Sinjar and Why It's Important." Business Insider.
[164] "Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar." *Crisis Group*, 13 Mar. 2018.
[165] "Battle for Sinjar: IS-Held Town in Iraq 'Liberated'." *BBC News*.

and borders Syria and Turkey. In terms of its political significance, "Sinjar falls within territory that the Iraqi Constitution classifies as disputed – or subject to claims from both the authorities in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Although Sinjar is administered as part of Ninewa province (which has Mosul as its capital), the KRG de facto controlled the district from 2003 until summer 2014, when ISIS took over."[166] The competing interests of Baghdad and Erbil regarding Sinjar have caused delays in reconstruction efforts and further complicates the political and security situation in Sinjar: "Article 140 and other parts of the Iraqi Constitution include a mechanism for resolving the status of disputed territories, calling for a process of 'normalisation' that reverses the Ba'ath Party's Arabisation policy in the areas, along with a census and a referendum on the future of Kirkuk. Although the initial deadline for implementing the article was December 2007, the government in Baghdad has yet to take any of these steps. The resulting uncertainty about who will rule Sinjar in the long term only heightens all communities' anxiety about their future."[167] Uncertainty about who is in charge is a push factor for Yazidis and deters them from moving back to Sinjar. There are so many parties with a vested interest in Sinjar that it is difficult to keep track of who is really in charge. "Sinjar stretches across myriad political and security fault lines, caught between the competing interests of Baghdad and Erbil; the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK); the Kurdish Peshmerga; the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliates; Shia-majority Hashd al-Shaabi militias and other

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[166] Abouzeid, Rania. *When the Weapons Fall Silent: Reconciliation in Sinjar after ISIS.*
[167] Abouzeid, Rania.

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paramilitary forces; and local players who powers such as Turkey, Syria, the United

States, and Iran actively support or oppose. In Sinjar, there is a deep distrust between

many Arabs, Yazidis, and Kurds; Yazidis of different political affiliations; Arab tribes;

some of these tribes and the state; and various armed groups."[168] In the years following its

liberation from ISIS, no real progress has been made to reconcile the interests of these

different stakeholders, leaving Sinjar in a state of limbo and discouraging lasting

rehabilitation efforts.

  The instability caused by having so many political stakeholders with competing

interests speaks to a larger issue: the overall political climate in Iraq. "As Sinjar is one of

the most complex and disputed areas in Iraq, helping displaced persons return home

safely means resolving – or, at least, attempting to resolve – some of the larger political

issues in Iraq."[169] The regional issues of Sinjar cannot be solved without first addressing

the roots of the problem in Iraq's larger political climate.

  Also problematic in Iraq's current political climate are the reverberations from the

United States' replacement of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. The United States

replaced the "...nominally secular Ba'athist regime with a sectarian quota system[170] that

made religious and ethnic identity the major organising principle of Iraqi politics.[171] Due

to the issues stated earlier regarding the lack of religious allies for Yazidis, this is

problematic. This identity-based system simultaneously guaranteed political

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168 Abouzeid, Rania. *When the Weapons Fall Silent: Reconciliation in Sinjar after ISIS.*
169 Abouzeid, Rania.
170 Khoder, Salam. "Iraq: The End of Sectarian Politics?"
171 "Iraq: Eroded Institutions, Sectarianism and Iranian Influence." *Arab Reform Initiative*.

representation to small minorities such as the Yazidis and limited the nationwide role they could play.[172] The system ensured that their numbers alone, and their resulting political influence, were unlikely to effect change without the support of stronger patrons from other ethnic and sectarian groups. In this way, the post-2003 Iraqi political system enabled power centres such as Erbil, Baghdad, the KDP, and the PUK to co-opt Yazidis, thereby widening political divisions within the minority group. Put another way, disputes between Iraq's big players have disrupted and fragmented their smaller counterparts, who need to fit within their patron's political apparatus to amplify their voices."[173] This issue will be discussed in further detail later, but the key takeaway is that the Yazidis and other Iraqi minorities are divided, when the only way they truly get a voice (or make the small voice they do have heard) in the Iraqi government is if they are solidified politically.[174]

The attacks by ISIS in Sinjar significantly impacted the relationships that were forged for hundreds of years prior between Yazidis and other minorities, Kurds, and their Arab neighbors. According to the European Council on Foreign Relations, "Yazidis were not the only ISIS target in the area. Sinjar's Christians also fled, as did Shi'ites in nearby Tal Afar and other areas – where some Sunnis turned against their neighbours to aid the extremists."[175] Communities that once lived in peace now have increased tensions, and it does not seem that these tensions are lessening, particularly with the lack of focus on

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[172] "Iraq: Eroded Institutions, Sectarianism and Iranian Influence." *Arab Reform Initiative*.
[173] Abouzeid, Rania. *When the Weapons Fall Silent: Reconciliation in Sinjar after ISIS.*
[174] Abdulhadi, Rana. "Iraqi Protestors Unite behind Demands, Not Sectarian Identities." *Atlantic Council*.
[175] Abouzeid, Rania. *When the Weapons Fall Silent: Reconciliation in Sinjar after ISIS.*

reconciliation efforts that are discussed later. Many Yazidis and other minorities do not trust their neighbors. In fact, the anxiety surrounding the return to Sinjar is still very present amongst the Yazidi population.[176] According to Abouzeid, some Yazidis "...say they were coaxed down from the Sinjar Mountains by their Arab and Kurdish Muslim neighbours… 'They tricked us into returning,' says Ayshan, a Yazidi woman in her forties, who ISIS kidnapped along with 30 members of her extended family after stopping their cars at gunpoint. The militants had set up checkpoints and sent patrols to search for fleeing Yazidi families. 'We thought we'd saved ourselves; we fled to the mountain; then they [called and] said there's nothing to fear – we won't fight you; we're fighting the state.' 'We know who they are,' she said. 'The person who detained us was a Kurd who lived with Yazidis. My brother said, 'this is so-and-so's son. Maybe I can ask him for mercy, to let us go.' My brother told him, 'we are neighbours, we are family, we lived together, you can't do this to us. You are from Sinjar; save us.'" His pleas were ignored."
[177] The Yezidis' memories and recollections of their Muslim neighbors' actions during the ISIS siege in 2014 are seared into their collective memory, resulting in distrust amongst groups that otherwise lived in close proximity with one another for many years. Returning to the level of trust that was once shared amongst these groups will take time and a conscious effort from both parties.

In Iraq, the defeat of ISIS has highlighted issues that have been present since the 1970s under the Saddam Hussein regime. The ECFR states "Following the 1975 Algiers

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[176] Clements. "Participant 5."
[177] Abouzeid, Rania. *When the Weapons Fall Silent: Reconciliation in Sinjar after ISIS.*

Agreement, designed to settle Iraq's and Iran's competing territorial claims, Baghdad

engaged in a campaign of forced demographic change in its ethnically and religiously

diverse northern provinces. In doing so, the Iraqi leadership aimed to address the

perceived threat that minority groups there might ally with a foreign power (particularly

Tehran) against Baghdad."[178] Just two years later, Yazidis were forced to register as

Arabs in the national census, and Yazidis were denied the right to register land in their

own name. All of these issues have been further complicated by the rise and fall of ISIS,

and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Sinjar residents. The escalating anxiety

about returning to Iraq, much less their homes and villages in Sinjar, is too great to

ignore. Without a plan for when residents do move back to Sinjar, no matter their ethnic

or religious affiliation, these tensions are not likely to dwindle over time but will likely be

enflared due to unresolved anger and resentment not only from ISIS and its effects, but

from long-standing issues that have not been addressed since the Saddam Hussein

regime..

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[178] Abouzeid, Rania.

CHAPTER 5: THE ROAD AHEAD

The first portion of Chapter 5 will explore the Yazidis' collective outlook on the future. The goal with this portion of the research is to give the reader a clear understanding of *why* the themes discussed in the second half of this chapter are important and should be prioritized when considering the rehabilitation of the Yazidi community. Understanding the outlook for the community as a whole, with as much granularity as possible given the limited interviews conducted and the condensed research period, is a decent starting point to prioritizing issues regarding the community's recovery, utilizing *their* perspective as a framework from which to build plans for the future. Without the perspective of the community itself, it is impossible for governments, non-profit organizations, and international aid organizations to truly help the community recover in a way that will be beneficial in the long term. The second half of Chapter 5 focuses primarily on the issues that current and future generations of Yazidis are facing. It is an attempt to prioritize key issues that are necessary to address in order to assist the community in its recovery process, and create an environment suitable for a recovering community in their own land.

While interviewing several members of the Yazidi community and one scholar who has focused explicitly on the issues of the Yazidis for several years, one of the questions I asked interview participants was, *What are your concerns for the future of the Yazidi community?* Although there were several variations in the participants' answers, there were some common themes that emerged throughout the interviews. I will focus on those themes in this chapter. I claim that these themes - reconciliation, divisions in the Yazidi community, security and rebuilding, the dwindling Yazidi population in Iraq, cohesiveness, and growth and stability of future generations - need to be prioritized and addressed directly by Yazidi community leaders, collective Yazidi members (including those in the diaspora abroad), the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Government of Iraq, non-profit organizations, and the international community, in order to give the Yazidis the best chance at rehabilitation from the ISIS attacks and a more stable future.

Outlook on the Collective Future: A Nuanced, Mixed Bag

Generally, the outlook on the future for many Yazidi members is bleak. But there seems to be some remnants of hope shining through the darkness of their recent history, even while the community collectively grieves and attempts to rebuild in Iraq or abroad. The long history of persecution that Yazidis have endured lends to an unexpected sense of hope and resiliency for some Yazidis in the wake of yet another genocide. Participant 5 stated that "[The genocide] connected the Yazidis more to their faith because the goal of the genocide was to wipe out the Yazidis and we've been here for thousands of years.

This is another genocide that's gonna pass by. But we're going to stay. And I think the Yazidis have just been more connected to their faith." Their collective memory is one of persecution coupled with endurance and overcoming, even when being targeted and persecuted by groups such as the Saddam Hussein regime or ISIS. When ISIS attacked the community, some members grew much more connected to this history of persecution, utilizing their increased faith and pride in being a Yazidi as a form of resisting ISIS and dissenting their vision for a world with only their radical interpretation of Islam.

When conducting interviews, there was an apparent generational divide within the community between the younger and older generations over several topics. The attacks by ISIS have accentuated the generational divide between the younger and older Yazidi generations.[179] If handled correctly, can be used as an opportunity to shift Yazidi practices that are seen by members of the younger generation and human rights activists as restrictive and discriminatory.[180][181] The younger generations have taken an active role in the societal direction of the Yazidi community, and the pressure that younger Yazidis who have been exposed to modern human rights ideals and western values are placing on the community have the potential to foster tangible positive change in the future. Participant 4 stated that "If the Yazidi community wants to survive, things in our religion need to change. In our community, in our culture. They need to change. If the Yazidi community wants to be eradicated--I mean, listen, we were the first inhabitants of that

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[179] Kizilhan, Jan Ilhan, and Michael Noll-Hussong. "Individual, Collective, and Transgenerational Traumatization in the Yazidi."
[180] Otten, Cathy. "How ISIS Changed the Yezidi Religion." *The Atlantic*.
[181] Clements. "Participant 4."

area. Look at us now. We're only 550,000 Yazidis in Iraq. That means that our numbers are declining, so we need to change."[182] These quote tells us that some members (particularly in the younger generation and/or the diaspora) of the Yazidi community are using the horrible actions that ISIS committed as a conduit for positive social change within the Yazidi community.[183][184]

Reconciliation

Arguably the most important theme of the recovery and longevity of the Yazidi community is reconciliation. I claim that reconciliation needs to occur on several planes for the recovery of the community as a whole to be possible. If any of these planes of reconciliation are ignored or not prioritized, there is a chance that the Yazidis will still feel threatened in their own community and their own country, and the wounds from the attempted ISIS genocide will fester and infect the collective Yazidi mindset regarding their status in their own country.[185]

I.   *Reconciliation between Yazidis.*

First, reconciliation between members of the Yazidi community needs to take place. The ramifications of the ISIS genocide have created divisions within the community, and has created more tension on the established traditions, mentalities, and systems within the community. Given the response of Yazidi leadership to women

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[182] Clements. "Participant 4." .
[183] Otten, Cathy. "How ISIS Changed the Yezidi Religion." *The Atlantic*.
[184] Clements. "Participant 4."
[185] Kizilhan, Jan Ilhan, and Michael Noll-Hussong. "Individual, Collective, and Transgenerational Traumatization in the Yazidi."

returning home from ISIS captivity, there is reconciliation needed between the Yazidi

community and its religious/community leaders. Participant 1 brought up the fairly recent

situation of the Yazidi community leaders not welcoming children born in captivity back

into the Yazidi community.[186][187] Participant 1 stated that "Hundreds of Yazidi women

cannot come back because they don't want to leave their babies. The community leaders

of Yazidis do not allow them to come back unless they give up on their child. They [the

children] will become ISIS in the future because they live among ISIS families."[188]

Another interview participant summed up the situation in the following quotation:

> Unfortunately because of the decision that our community made, there are Yazidi
>
> girls that called their family members...they said 'Can I bring this child with me
>
> because it's my son or daughter?' The Yazidi families said 'No, the child will be
>
> taken away.' The girl hung up, and never contacted the family again. This
>
> happened in some cases. In some cases the children were taken away from the
>
> women, and the women never saw the children again. This is horrible. This is
>
> unacceptable. You cannot do that. Our community needs to understand -- like I
>
> understand my community. I understand that they feel like this is the blood of an
>
> ISIS member that is now being mixed with the Yazidi community - with the
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> Yazidis who are very precious about their being, you know? So I understand my
>
> community. But we have to understand that when this woman was in captivity,

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[186] Arraf, Jane. "In Syria, An Orphanage Cares For Children Born To Yazidi Mothers Enslaved By ISIS." *NPR*.
[187] Louisa Loveluck, Mustafa Salim. "Yazidi Women Raped as ISIS Slaves Face Brutal Homecoming Choice: Give up Their Child or Stay Away." *The Washington Post*.
[188] Clements and Sevdeen. "Participant 1."

this child was probably the only loving being that was loving her. We cannot

forget that. And this blows my mind that our community made this stand while

we should have been better.[189]

The choice that some Yazidi women have been forced to make - the choice between

never seeing their Yazidi loved ones again or staying with ISIS families in hopes of

protecting their child born in captivity, and leaving behind children born to ISIS members

to return home and potentially still face rejection from their family - is an outright

impossible decision, and it is inhumane to ask of a mother.[190]

Yazidi women who were held captive by ISIS have felt marginalized from their

own families and have felt unsafe returning home, aware that their return from captivity

also bears a risk of rejection from their own family back home.[191] For instance, when

asked about Yazidi women who were taken as ISIS sex slaves, Participant 1 stated that

"In some cases when they were freed from ISIS and returned to their families, the father

was telling the mother to convince her [the daughter] to commit suicide. In many cases

they committed suicide after they were freed and were given back to their families."[192]

The marginalization of these women from their families, and therefore from their

communities, has resulted in feelings of abandonment and hopelessness from their

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[189] Clements. "Participant 4."
[190] Kohnavard, Nafiseh. "A Yazidi Mother's Heart-Breaking Choice." *BBC News*.
[191] Ertl1, Verena, et al. "Trauma and Perceived Social Rejection among Yazidi Women and Girls Who Survived Enslavement and Genocide." This study concluded that: "In a context of maximum adversity, enslavement and war-related events contribute to high levels of PTSD and depression. Perceived social rejection seems to play a role in the relationship between trauma exposure and mental health among abducted genocide survivors. Providing psychosocial support and treatment for Yazidi people is essential and urgently required."
[192] Clements. "Participant 1."

families. Participant 4 stated that "No one can decide on someone's life. The problem within our community is that most of these conversations are done by men. No women are involved. Has anyone talked to a Yazidi woman survivor and asked her opinion about the situation?...As a community, we are traumatizing them. The mothers need psychological treatment just to cope with that trauma. And we inflicted that upon them...there needs to be change in our society a lot. But you won't hear that from a lot of Yazidis."[193] The rejection of women upon their arrival home from captivity is a method of shaming them for sexual slavery and rape - crimes that were committed by ISIS without their consent or control. This example indicates a tension between modern human rights ideals and traditional perceptions of women who are victims of rape within the Yazidi community. In order for them to recover, these women need reconciliation with their families (specifically their parents) and the Yazidi community writ large, along with a promise of acceptance and space to grieve within their own community in the future. It is impossible to recover in a community that marginalizes individuals for things outside of their control.

    II.   Reconciliation with Muslim Neighbors.

Second, the community needs to reconcile with its Muslim neighbors, particularly neighboring Sunni villages that were involved in ISIS attacks. Participant 3 claimed that "The community is destroyed. I will not say that they are totally destroyed, but it was affected very badly by ISIS. They don't trust other people. But not only don't they trust,

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[193] Clements. "Participant 4."

they see those people that took their children and girls, killed their brothers and their

fathers -- they are living with them. That needs to have a kind of a long-term strategy that

people can be able to live with each other. Otherwise they can separate. Or they will

separate." So how do we build an effective strategy that takes the interests of both parties

into account? How do we build a sustainable strategy on the local level? It has to be done

by individuals.

A concern of some interview participants has been potential conflicts between

Yazidis and Muslims upon their return to Sinjar due to feelings of unresolved tensions

from the attempted genocide and a resulting desire for revenge for some Yazidis.[194][195]

Participant 5 stated that "I think reconciliation is another thing...we've been living with

Muslims for hundreds and hundreds of years. I mean, not everybody was ISIS. Even

though some of our neighbors affiliated with ISIS and attacked the Yazidis. But I mean,

they still have some Muslims there that are very close friends with the Yazidis. They've

been helping them. They're providing assistance to them. I think they have to

communicate because Yazidis are -- now they are angry and they want revenge. We don't

want them to go back to their villages next to the Arab village and then confrontation

happens."[196] Given their small numbers, fractured relationships with their Muslim

neighbors has the potential to be a large point of contention for both communities in the

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[194] Coles / Reuters. "Iraqi Yazidis Take Revenge as Islamic State Atrocities Unearthed."
[195] "Iraq: Yezidi Fighters Allegedly Execute Civilians." *Human Rights Watch*.
[196] Clements. "Participant 5."

future. Addressing those fractures and attempting to repair those relationships as quickly as possible will make recovery for both communities more feasible.

This participant's idea for fostering reconciliation in the community is the formation of a reconciliation committee that would consist of representatives from different villages, communities, and levels of the community and support an open dialogue about the recovery from and prevention of future attacks on the Yazidis and vice versa. As Yazidis begin to return to Sinjar and surrounding areas from IDP camps, this may become an issue. He stated that "I'm not aware of any big-scale incidents of that [revenge] because many Yazidis are still in IDP camps. Not many of them went back. And this is a problem I think that might come up if Yazidis went back. That's totally understandable for the people that lost their wives, girls, and daughters who were raped through the process of the genocide. I think a reconciliation committee is very important."[197] A reconciliation committee may be a worthwhile attempt at building a framework that can assist in communicating the varying communities' perspectives on reconciliation and prioritization in recovery efforts, both on an infrastructural and interpersonal level. Perhaps the framework for Truth Commissions, which are "established to research and report on abuses of human rights and humanitarian law over a particular period of time in a specific country, or in relation to a particular conflict...Typically they are convened temporarily in order to allow victims, their relatives and perpetrators to give evidence of human rights abuses or other criminal

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[197] Clements. "Participant 5."

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transgressions - providing an official forum for their accounts. In most instances, truth commissions are also required to provide recommendations on steps to prevent a recurrence of past abuses. They are created, vested with authority, sponsored, and/or funded by the government of the country."[198] An example of a seemingly successful case is the Rwandan Trust Commission, established in 1999 with the Mandate: "to organize national public debates aimed at promoting reconciliation, foster tolerance and a culture of peace and human rights, and denounce any ideas aimed at disunity. It was tasked to educate Rwandese on their rights and the rights of others, draft laws to foster reconciliation and monitor whether authorities and the people in general 'respect and observe the policy of national unity and reconciliation' as contained in the Political Code of Ethics of the Arusha Accord."[199] If tailored to the specific needs of the Yazidis and other minorities, and the social fabric of Iraq, this forum could be a successful approach to reconciliation in the long term.

The success of reconciliation efforts within and between these communities will directly impact and determine the security situation in Sinjar, and in turn the longevity and recovery of the Yazidi community as a whole, as well as the determination of the new 'status quo' in the Sinjar region - will the parties be able to reconcile to the point where there is a sense of friendship and camaraderie at best, or tolerance at worst? Or will ISIS succeed in further dividing the Iraqi population and marginalizing minorities?

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[198] "Truth Commission Digital Collection." *United States Institute of Peace*.
[199] "Truth Commission: Rwanda 99." *United States Institute of Peace*.

Third, the community needs to reconcile with the Kurdish Government and its

Peshmerga forces. Reconciliation is the first step in mending feelings of abandonment

and anger on the part of the Yazidi community towards the Peshmerga forces.[200] One of

the greatest causes of anger stems from the feeling of abandonment that many Yazidis

had after the attacks began on August 3, 2014. Prior to the attacks by ISIS, the Yazidi

community placed a certain level of trust within the KRG and its Peshmerga forces, and

in the interviews I heard several accounts of Yazidi families staying in Sinjar due to the

level of trust and the promise of safety that the Kurdish Peshmerga forces had provided.

But the feelings of abandonment run deeper than just the withdrawal of Kurdish

forces prior to the attacks. Some Yazidis feel doubly abandoned -- meaning that they feel

abandoned in the sense that the Kurdish forces physically left Sinjar upon ISIS's arrival,

but also in the sense that the Peshmerga forces left them alone without any way to protect

themselves. Participant 3 stated that "It [the genocide] created a big huge division among

Yazidis. Why? Because of what happened and the fact that Kurdish forces - especially

Barzani forces - abandoned them. And not only abandoned them - didn't protect them -

just left them alone without a way to even protect themselves...They helped ISIS so they

would take all this land, all these people, all these girls."[201] This quote speaks to a feeling

of betrayal within the Yazidi community that runs far deeper than simply retreating

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[200] Zoonen, Dave van. "The Yazidis: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict." *United States Institute of Peace*.
[201] Clements. "Participant 3."

military forces at the onset of an attack. Another participant claimed "The people who we trusted...the Kurds. They are the ones who sold us."[202] Some Yazidis feel that the value placed on their lives by the Peshmerga forces was far less than the value that they placed on their own lives, even though the Peshmerga forces were there to protect the Yazidis and the Yazidis had no way of protecting themselves by their own means.

As Participant 3 alluded to, some Yazidis also feel that the Peshmerga forces were attempting to facilitate the downfall of the Yazidi community. Yilmaz and Sevdeen state: "In the eyes of most Yazidis, the KRG was also responsible for the consequences of the ISIS attacks which, in the end, constituted another genocidal event in Yazidi history and became known as the 73rd Ferman...the Yazidis' military and political goals in post-ISIS Iraq have centered around self-defence and self-rule in Sinjar. The motto of Yazidi survival has now become: 'Neither Arabisation nor Kurdification, but Yazidism.'"[203] The feelings of anger, resentment, and fear that another genocide could occur are the main drivers behind Yazidi demands for ways to protect and govern themselves.[204]

In order to reconcile, the Peshmerga forces need to acknowledge what happened on August 3rd, 2014. Without acknowledging their leaving at the onset of the attacks and the reasons behind it, there will be no closure for Yazidis. Participant 4 stated:

> The Kurdish government needs to tell the truth about what happened on the
> morning of 3 August. Yazidis are very angry with the Kurdish government about
> why the Peshmerga withdrew...There has not been any recognition from the

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[202] Clements. "Participant 2."
[203] Yilmaz and Sevdeen. "The Yazidi Quest for Protection in Sinjar in the Post-ISIS Iraq."
[204] Clements. "Participant 3."

government that this happened on 3 August but there are videos of the Peshmerga

withdrawing without taking the civilians out...Lose the land. Win it back. But our

people are lost! I lost 19 girls of my family. Two of them escaped. 17 until this

day, are missing. I lost 21 men of my family. We assume they are dead in the

mass graves. So what do you tell the Yazidi community that was expecting

Kurdish government soldiers to protect them? That is a problem. And there needs

to be acknowledgement of that. That makes Yazidis angry and there's no trust. If

you want to rebuild trust, you need to acknowledge your mistakes. Everyone

makes mistakes. This was a failure from their side and they need to acknowledge

that. But there is now a huge divide between the Kurdish people and the Yazidi

people.[205]

In order to return to a tolerant relationship between Yazidis and Kurds in and around

Sinjar, reconciliation needs to occur. Five years later, the Yazidi community is still

adamant that the Kurds need to acknowledge what happened so that both parties can take

the necessary first steps in not only moving on, but actually recovering in a way that is

sustainable and isn't perpetuating a cycle of resentment between the two groups.

   IV.   Reconciliation with the Government of Iraq.

Fourth, the community needs reconciliation with the Iraqi government. The

infrastructure of the modern nation-state is one in which states are expected to take care

of certain basic human needs, such as the security, safety, and welfare of its population.[206]

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[205] Clements. "Participant 4."
[206] "The Purpose of Today's Nation State." *The Bassiouni Group*.

[207] This failure is not specific to the Yazidi community, as Iraq was unable to protect many of its people from the makings of its own social deterioration in what became ISIS, but the Yazidis were persecuted with much more vigor by ISIS.[208][209]

In the modern era, individuals expect their state to protect them from harm, and the Iraqi government was unable to do that. But the Yazidis need reconciliation with the Iraqi government for issues that run deeper than just the rise of ISIS and the consequential attacks on the Yazidis in 2014. The Yazidis need reconciliation with the Government of Iraq for silencing them and not allowing them to have a voice in their own government, and for the historical marginalization of religious minorities writ large in Iraq. The lack of political influence is a major factor in the Yazidis' ability to make decisions regarding the defense of their lives and their land, and in a democracy, representation of minority groups should be expected and emphasized to ensure that the most vulnerable groups in that society have a voice in their government and in their own country. Participant 5 stated: "Nothing has changed...There are some very well educated Yazidis. Why not a minister? Why not a prime minister?...We're talking about a democracy…That doesn't exist right now..Why don't we have a Christian as a Prime Minister? A Yazidi as a Prime Minister? It's not right..we got lost in between."[210] Additionally, Sevdeen and Schmidinger state that "The Yazidis' most important demands

[207] Axtmann, Roland. "The State of the State: The Model of the Modern State and Its Contemporary Transformation."
[208] "Ceaseless Persecution Marks the Yazidis' History." *AP NEWS*.
[209] Armstrong, Kerrie. "Who Are the Yazidis and Why Are They Persecuted?" *SBS News*.
[210] Clements. "Participant 5."

include improving their political participation by giving them a seat in the Kurdistan regional parliament in Erbil and increasing their seats in the federal parliament in Baghdad from one to five; protecting their disputed areas between Arabs and Kurds (Sinjar); combating discrimination based on faith and hate speech by some Muslim clerics; and finally the return of ISIS-abducted women (estimated in thousands) and Yazidi children (estimated in hundreds)."[211] Five years after the ISIS attacks and the failure to protect the Yazidis from genocide, the Yazidis still do not have a voice in their own government.

Divisions in the Yazidi Community

> I.   *Divisions regarding identity.*

Perhaps the most intriguing shift in the Yazidi community following the 2014 genocide has been the division of the Yazidi community regarding their collective identity and specifically, whether or not the Yazidis are Kurds. Throughout the interviews, I heard several arguments on this topic, and the debate over Yazidi-Kurdish identity was one of the topics that evoked more emotional responses from interview participants. Participant 3 stated that "They [Yazidis] want to stand away from being a Kurd. They say in Kurdish, 'I am not a Kurd.' But they know they are a Kurd...they are. It's a historical fact."[212] So why does the distinction between the Yazidis and the Kurds exist? Why are some Yazidis so adamantly against being linked to the Kurds?

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[211] Sevdeen and Schmidinger. *Beyond ISIS: History and Future of Religious Minorities in Iraq.*
[212] Clements. "Participant 3."

One likely explanation is based on a perception of history. Participant 4 stated that "Their ethnicity is the Yazidis and their religion is Yazidism. There are differences. If you look through history, you know that the Kurds were Yazidis. The Yazidis were the first inhabitants of those areas. This is an ancient religion. But persecution has made those Yazidis convert to Islam and become the Kurds. A lot of people deny that. There is a lot of pressure on the Yazidi community to say that they are Kurdish, but the Kurdish people shouldn't force the Yazidis to be a part of a group that they don't belong."[213] The history of the Yazidis and Kurds is no doubt intertwined, related, and connected, but the determining factor between whether or not Yazidis fall under the larger umbrella of 'Kurds' seems to be relatively subjective and varies depending on who you ask and in what context. Perhaps it would be safest to say that based on religious criteria, the Yazidis and the Kurds differ, but ethnically, they are the same people. The issue with that becomes: What is the criteria for the Yazidi identity? Is it bloodline, ethnicity, religion, or all of these things? Can a Yazidi be a Kurd and/or a Kurd be a Yazidi, or does belonging to one group exclude an individual from belonging to the other? It seems that this is a personal question that must be answered by each individual Kurd and/or Yazidi. Bayar Mustafa Sevdeen and Thomas Schmidinger claim that "Yazidis speak Kurmanji, a dialect of Kurdish language and are mostly considered ethnically Kurdish, though their distinct religious identity is Yazidism."[214]

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[213] Clements. "Participant 4."
[214] Yilmaz and Sevdeen. "The Yazidi Quest for Protection in Sinjar in the Post-ISIS Iraq."

A likely explanation for the more recent Kurd-Yazidi separation sentiments are the withdrawal of Kurdish Peshmerga forces prior to ISIS's attacks in Sinjar by the Peshmerga forces. The discussion earlier regarding this withdrawal and feelings of abandonment offers a modern explanation, outside of the historical interconnectedness and attempts at distinguishing themselves from the larger Kurdish community, for why Yazidis may be seeking to distance themselves from the Kurds and exaggerate the sense of distance that already exists between the two groups.

II.   *Divisions Regarding Prioritization.*

Reconciliation efforts themselves have also fractured based on divisions in the community. Participant 3 stated that "The negative impact was community. The groups and centers don't agree on certain issues. Divisions back there [in Iraq] affected people here too. And that division is the reason that there were many centers...created. They cannot get together and they cannot work together." Logistically, having so many groups dedicated to the recovery and rebuilding of the Yazidi community is just not efficient and leaves room for poor prioritization, inefficient allocation of resources, and duplication of effort.

This is not to say that any of the groups currently participating in the rebuilding of the community are doing so with the wrong intention, but if there were a way to bring those groups together (or at least create some overlap in their priorities and programs) and create a road map for the entire community, taking into account each subgroup's (i.e. men, women, children, diaspora, displaced persons, etc.) priorities, perhaps the recovery

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efforts would be more beneficial to the whole community, and the organizations themselves would be more representative of the needs of the entire Yazidi community.

Security + Rebuilding

The main deterrent for Yazidis moving back to Sinjar is security. Five years after the attacks in Sinjar, a majority of Yazidis are still living in Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps in Iraq and Syria, or are living abroad.[215][216] Although Yazidis have been encouraged to move back to Sinjar, the lack of security and lengthy rebuilding process in the Sinjar region have prevented that from becoming a reality.[217][218] One interview participant stated:

> I think the biggest danger here is that governments will dangle millions of dollars
>
> in front of the Yazidis to get them back to Sinjar, but never answer the security
>
> question and that is -- you have to understand that Yazidis have been persecuted
>
> for so many years. This is not the first time. So there is a problem within the
>
> society about accepting religious minorities. And religious minorities like the
>
> Yazidi community are not well treated. And as long as those things are there -
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> those problems are there - and they are not solved - not by any of the
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> governments - not by the Iraqi government, not by the Kurdish government...then
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> you have these problems and they become hatred. And hatred becomes murder
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> and mass murders and genocide. So I think the problem is much more than --

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[215] Hincks, Joseph. "Yazidis in Iraq and Syria Fear ISIS Return After Turkish Op." *Time*.
[216] Media, AA&D. "Research Team Members Visit Camp for Internally Displaced Persons in Northern Iraq."
[217] Fox, Tessa. "Yazidi Farmers Return Home to Cultivate Farmland after Years in Exile."
[218] Cornish, Chloe. "Sinjar's Exiled Yazidis Are Still a Long Way from Returning Home."

security has different layers. Security from ISIS but also security from neighbors

that might hate the Yazidi community, you know?[219]

The idea that the Yazidis lack security in their own social standing is vital in

understanding the outlook and the way forward for the collective community.

The physical security of Sinjar (or lack thereof) cannot be overstated as a

determining factor in the recovery of the community and its traditions. Participant 4

stated that "Sinjar needs a lot of rebuilding. A lot. All of the infrastructure - electricity,

the water, the buildings - it's not in place."[220] Granted, the portions of Iraq that were

controlled by ISIS at one point or another are and will be recovering and rebuilding their

infrastructure for years to come. But how do the governments of Iraq and Kurdistan

expect to build trust with the Yazidi community while at the same time encouraging them

to return to Sinjar with no basic infrastructure.[221] Not only is providing basic

infrastructure in Sinjar vital to the immediate physical recovery and cohesion of the

Yazidi community, but it also is an effective way to instill hope for the recovery of the

community in Iraq.[222] Participant 3 said that "Helping those people to go back to their

homes and rebuild their life and providing the basic needs to the people - education and

basic services like electricity and clean water...Those are the steps that people can trust

and can have hope that they stay in their land and rebuild their life."[223]

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[219] Clements. "Participant 4."
[220] Clements. "Participant 4."
[221] Hovring, Roald. "Peace Prize 2018: NRC on the Ground in Sinjar." *NRC*.
[222] Fox, Tessa. "Yazidi Farmers Return Home to Cultivate Farmland after Years in Exile."
[223] Clements. "Participant 3."

There is also the issue of political security. Participant 4 also said that "...we're talking about 260,000 Yazidis that are displaced. How and when can these Yazidis return to Sinjar? We're looking now at 5 years being in IDP camps. There's a reason Yazidis are not going back and that's safety and security. As long as there are like five different militias in Sinjar with everyone saying a different kind of thing, it is not a good place for Yazidis to be in at the moment. Because you don't want to be in that mess - in the middle of all of that."[224] Political instability and lack of representation is a deterrent for Yazidis waiting to return to Sinjar. Participant 5 stated that "The other problem is politics - Politicians and political parties. They are so...involved in the situation in Sinjar too...We have the Hash'd al Shaabi Shia militia, we have PDK, we have Yazidis - they want their own militia too. And we have PKK and we have YPG. And everybody's pulling some part of some group of Yazidis towards them too. And this is another thing - Yazidis are struggling to be united, unified under one umbrella because of those issues there." Due to Sinjar's historical significance and strategic location, these different political and military groups are using the Yazidi genocide as a conduit for gaining influence in the Sinjar region. It is hard to unify a community and set attainable goals for recovery when the community has such a diverse range of political and military alignments, interests, and influences.

Will Yazidis Live on in Iraq?

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[224] Clements. "Participant 4."

With years of turmoil and hardship in Iraq, a key question for the collective future of the community is whether or not a majority of the Yazidis intend to stay in their homeland. Although staying or leaving Iraq is a highly personal choice, there are several trends that I was able to pick up on throughout the interviews. Going forward, more research needs to be conducted on the future outlook of the Yazidi community living in Iraq and abroad, because the decisions Yazidis make about leaving or staying will inevitably have effects on oral traditions, religious practices, and the cohesiveness of the Yazidi community as a whole.

The generational divide between older Yazidis and younger Yazidis is a determining factor on whether or not Yazidis will stay in Iraq or leave to live abroad. The interviews that were conducted for this research came mainly from Yazidis who are around 20-40 years old, and living in the United States. Several of them have lived outside of Iraq for some or most of their lives, so the reader must keep that in mind when reading their analyses. However, the perspective is highly valuable given their strong connections to Yazidis who do still live in Iraq, their drivers for leaving Iraq in the first place (which most times were due to other experiences of persecution), their experiences living outside of Iraq, and their exposure and adaptation to the western world. For example, there is a sense of disconnect from the Iraqi (and Syrian, in this participant's case) national identity for some Yazidis living in the United States, given the tumultuous history in Iraq. One participant stated "I love it here. This is my country now. The US gave me everything. Gave me shelter, gave me security, gave me a job...gave me

everything. This is what we want from a country. Gave me citizenship. I lived in Syria

for 25 years. Every single year they have to go through the process of renewing our visas.

For 25 years they didn't give us anything. And then after four years and nine months, I

applied for a citizenship and now I'm a citizen. What else can I ask for? This is my

country."[225] Interestingly, this participant is still very connected to his faith, but not his

Iraqi national identity. He stated "Knowing that the country - talking about Iraq -

wouldn't provide me with anything and didn't have any hope for that country to have a

democracy or have the stability to go back and live in it in the right way - to have my

rights to practice my faith without looking over my shoulder - these are some of the

reasons that I think 'I'm done with that.'"[226] This is interesting because many accounts

claim that Yazidis are hesitant to leave Iraq due to their faith, but here we see a case of an

individual who wishes to *leave* Iraq in order to have more rights to practice the faith that

was fostered there. So, there is a tension between wanting to stay in Iraq due to the

Yazidi connection to the faith in Iraq, and the desire for the right to practice that faith

without fear of retaliation, even if that place is outside of the historical center of their

faith.

In western media coverage on the Yazidi genocide and accounts of Yazidis

displaced from their homeland, some sources claim that the Yazidis will not leave

because of their strong connection to the land, and the importance of the Sinjar region to

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[225] Clements. "Participant 5."
[226] Clements. "Participant 5."

the Yazidi faith.[227][228] One trend that was apparent in the interviews, though, was that younger generations are more likely to desire moving from Iraq altogether not only due to their concerns for their safety and security, but because of their past traumas and memories in Iraq, and a sense that the Iraqi government has failed them. In fact, two of the younger interview participants stated that most Yazidis want to leave Iraq and one of the only reasons people stay there is because they do not have the resources to leave. Many Yazidis do not feel like they have a future in Iraq, particularly in the midst of demining efforts, lack of infrastructure, unstable government, and the rampant corruption in both the Kurdish and Iraqi governments. Even with the aid and rebuilding efforts occurring in Sinjar, life is still very hard for Yazidis. Regarding corruption, one participant stated "Do you trust the mouse with the cheese? Same thing with KRG and the Iraqi government. Give them the aid - the money for the Yazidis. Iraq doesn't need US aid. Iraq is a rich country...there is agriculture, there are all kinds of things. All goes to the pockets of certain people. Maybe 10 or 20. Other than that, 'Who the heck are the Yazidis?'"[229] Participant 5 stated that "The problem is I'm not seeing any light at the end of the tunnel for the Iraq situation. It's very hard. Especially for those poor people to survive there, it's very tough. I know there's many programs there but they are very small programs providing very very little…Those IDP camps - they only have maybe one clinic for hundreds of thousands of people. They're seeing maybe 500 people per day

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[227] Ferguson, Adam. "Who Are the Yazidis, the Ancient, Persecuted Religious Minority Struggling to Survive in Iraq?" *National Geographic*.
[228] Green, Emma. "The Yazidis, a People Who Fled." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company.
[229] Clements. "Participant 2."

sometimes at those clinics. And the majority of the doctors there are volunteers...I wish whoever wants to could get a chance to get out."[230] Perhaps the older generations do wish to stay in Iraq due to their connections to the land, the isolation from the western world and its influence, and the simplistic lifestyle, but the younger generation seems to be more open to living abroad and continuing Yazidi traditions outside of the Sinjar area. Given this generational shift, the Yazidi population may continue to dwindle in Iraq although the genocide has ended, exacerbating the vulnerability of those that remain behind, fracturing the close-knit sense of community that the Yazidis share, but also allowing space for the community to evolve and change in some positive ways, like in the direction of modern human rights ideals (more on this later).

Concerns for Future Generations

    I.   Cohesiveness

Several of the interview participants used the term 'lost' to describe the Yazidis currently living abroad and the next generation of Yazidis that would be raised outside of Iraq, given their concerns for the cohesion of the community now that they are scattered across several continents. Sevdeen stated that the Yazidi community would be "lost by the second generation...the third generation if not the second generation."[231] Participant 5 stated:

> I hope they [the next generation] don't get lost. By getting lost I mean, now we
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> are scattered everywhere, to be honest. And now not many people are staying in

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[230] Clements. "Participant 5."
[231] Clements and Sevdeen. "Participant 1."

Iraq. The new generation...There have been people that are still connected with

their faith, but I'm not sure if that's going to change in the long run. As time goes

on, maybe they're gonna just say 'Okay, don't worry about it. We're done. We're

gonna forget.' Not this generation but the following generation might, especially

the people that are born here and don't know anything about the Yazidis. Another

thing: Even though families try, like parents try very hard to say 'this is this' and

'this is the Yazidi faith', it's very hard for the people who were raised or born

here to follow...But the people there in Lalish, Sinjar, and northern Iraq, their

faith is still very strong. If they stayed there I think...I'm not saying that they're

gonna go totally extinct and disappear, but if everybody got out that might...But

like for example for me. If I got married. If I had a son. What is my son going to

know about the Yazidis?[232]

Naturally, if the next generation grows up outside of the Iraqi culture and only goes back

to visit for vacation or to see family, it would be more difficult for them to understand

and connect to the culture and the land in the same way that those who have been raised

in Iraq do. Additionally, some Yazidis have no desire to go back to Iraq at all. One

participant stated "To be honest, for their generation, they would love someday to go

back if the situation is good. But for us, like as a younger generation, it's very tough. I've

never thought in my mind I would go back to Iraq - live back in Iraq again. Never. Never

came to my mind. Never crossed my mind. Not even visiting, like it or not."[233]

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[232] Clements. "Participant 5."
[233] Clements. "Participant 5."

In contrast to Participant 1 who stated "When they [Yazidis] come to the United States, they will totally disconnect from the region,"[234] another participant who moved to the United States prior to 2000 and has raised 5 children in the States does not see this as a concern. He explained that he took the time to teach his children about the Yazidis, about the Yazidi faith and history, and to ensure that they felt connected to their heritage. He discussed how his children enjoyed going back to Iraq to visit family and go on vacation, and that they are proud to call themselves Yazidis.[235] It seems that the concern would be two or three generations from now. Will Yazidis continue to educate their children on the Yazidi faith, history, and culture? Will a generation of Yazidis who have been raised abroad be willing and able to maintain the connection to their culture within their individual family units? One participant states that "If you don't have history, you don't exist...if you don't know your background or your history, then to me you're lost."[236] Surely the only way to maintain a connection to their identity as Yazidis is for their loved ones to educate them on the community.

II. *Education*

One of the main concerns that interview participants had is the concern for the education of the community, and particularly the young children who have now spent a majority of their lives in IDP camps. Many Yazidis that are still in Iraq are living in IDP camps, with poor access to education. The camps do have schools, but the classes are so

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[234]   Clements and Sevdeen. "Participant 1."
[235]   Clements. "Participant 3."
[236] Clements. "Participant 2."

large and resources are so strained that giving the children the depth and attention that is necessary in their lessons is all but impossible. The next generation of Yazidi children who have been raised in these camps will be lacking in thorough education, which will affect the entirety of their lives. Additionally, the education that they receive during this time likely is being affected by the trauma of ISIS and/or the trauma of being raised in camps with poor living conditions.

III.   Traditions

Given the generational disconnect previously discussed, there was a trend towards modern human rights ideals in the interviews. The younger generation of Yazidis seem to be more progressive on issues such as womens' rights, democracy, etc. Participant 4 stated:

> Our generation is coming into a modern world. For thousands and thousands of
>
> years our people have been living in rural areas of Iraq, knowing nothing from
>
> the world. And more and more people are being resettled in different countries
>
> like Germany. They see the world. They see a different world. They see a modern
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> world. They see equal rights. They see women's rights. It's a change. I think that
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> our community is going to change with the modern world now that they are
>
> exposed to the modern world. And they have to to keep continuing...to make sure
>
> that the youth will stay strong with the Yazidi community. I think the youth now
>
> has a better chance for education.

The younger Yazidi generations are utilizing the genocide as a catalyst of change towards modern human rights ideals, which is important, given the research opportunities that this

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opens up. For example, the Free Yezidi Foundation seeks justice for female ISIS victims, provides Yazidi women opportunities and a "second chance" at life, and will eventually move into work regarding gender-based violence.[237] These individuals are really taking their chance at making a difference within their own community and the world, and empowering others within the Yazidi community to do the same.

Yazidi social traditions indicate that Yazidis are not allowed to marry outside of the community, and members of different castes within the community are unable to marry. There is a concern that with Yazidis being spread across the world, it will be more difficult to carry on [and repopulate] with these restrictions on marriage, particularly in the next generation when Yazidis will be spread out and potentially unable to meet and marry someone in their own caste. In Yazidi culture, bloodlines are sacred, and the dispersal of the community following the attacks in 2014 are sure to disrupt those bloodlines. Participant 5 stated that "It will. It will. Definitely it will. I mean, this caste thing is another issue. I'm not a spiritual leader or anything, and I'm not sure if you know - Yazidis among themselves, they have castes. They don't marry from each other. And if they remove those castes, that's going to help a little bit."[238] If the Yazidi leadership and community would be willing to open up marriages between castes, perhaps that would allow the next generation of Yazidis to marry within the community and somewhat continue the direct lineage from generation to generation. But a change like that would not be easy for members to adjust to. Even in the current context, one participant stated

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[237] Clements. "Participant 4."
[238] Clements. "Participant 5."

"Genocide has not done anything to change that [the castes]."[239] It's likely that some or most Yazidis would still follow the social norms that are established and have been set in place for hundreds of years as an act of resistance to changing traditions, the younger generation's influence, or just fear of change in general.

Somewhat related to this tradition is the idea that a child is only considered a Yazidi if both parents are members of the Yazidi community. For example, if a woman was taken as a sex slave after the ISIS attack in 2014, and was kept in captivity where she was raped and became pregnant during captivity, that child would not be recognized as a Yazidi by the Yazidi community or the state of Iraq (Iraqi law indicates that the child's paternal religion indicates the child's religion, so children of ISIS fighters are considered Muslims under Iraqi law).[240] Some women that have been in this situation have essentially defected from the Yazidi community in order to keep their child.[241][242] The Yazidis have an opportunity to welcome these women and children back into the community, and allow for social progress based on the fact that the children were born outside of the mother's control, but that does not make that child any less hers. Given the sharp decline in the Yazidi population due to the ISIS genocide, it is imperative that the Yazidi community welcome back its current members with open arms, and allow those women to raise their children in the Yazidi faith.

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[239] Clements. "Participant 4."
[240] Arraf, Jane. "Freed From ISIS, Yazidi Mothers Face Wrenching Choice: Abandon Kids Or Never Go Home." *NPR*.
[241] Otten, Cathy. "A Broken Homecoming." *Foreign Policy*.
[242] Clements. "Participant 4."

Another way that the Yazidis may be able to grow is to welcome Muslim Kurds who wish to return to their original (Yazidi) faith, and join the community. Currently, this is strictly forbidden, but the right to practice their desired faith should be honored. Participant 5 stated:

> And then, the majority of Kurds...I remember when the Baba Sheikh came here with the delegation at the beginning of 2015. Many Kurds came, Muslim Kurds came - 'Will you please open the door for us? We just want to come up because the majority of the Kurds, they say 'Okay we were Yazidis. We're converted because during the Ottoman Empire, before that, they forced us to convert to Islam, and we want to come back to our faith.' Original faith. It's a Kurdish faith. And now, a lot of them, they ask the same question: 'Please, would you open the door for us to come back? To go back?'...I'm with it, honestly. If they're going to survive, they're going to have to do something like that. But the thing is the Yazidi faith is very closed. They don't like...if you got out you got out, you cannot come back in.[243]

This is an opportunity for the Yazidi community to grow its numbers, while also opening up the door for improved relationships with the Kurds.

There is a risk that religious traditions will change as time goes on. For example, Yazidis are required to go to Lalish, a Yazidi temple in Iraq, to be baptized once in their lives.[244][245] When living in Iraq, this requirement was generally feasible for most Yazidis;

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[243] Clements. "Participant 5."
[244] Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on Their Faces: Yezidi Women and the Islamic State*.
[245] Clements. "Participant 4."

however, now that more and more Yazidis live or are moving outside of Iraq, or they are in IDP camps with little means to return to Sinjar, will the Yazidi community still expect Yazidis to be baptized at Lalish? Additionally, the religious traditions, as discussed earlier, are mostly passed down orally - how will Yazidis continue to pass these teachings and traditions down orally with the factor of geographic separation playing such a large role in the community?

CONCLUSION: A DISCUSSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

This plight of the Yazidi community will not be resolved quickly or without complication. It is important though, that we as humans learn from the horrible events of 2014, and use these events as a catalyst for positive change, and not as a death sentence, as ISIS would hope to see. The plight of the Yazidis speaks to a larger societal issue that directly affects religious minorities in Iraq that began well before the 2014 attacks. So, how do we foster an Iraqi society that is accepting of religious minorities, or better yet all religions, particularly in a context where the entire population of Iraq is attempting to recover from the attacks by ISIS? It must be done at the grassroots level.

Although there are actions that religious leaders, states, local and federal governments, and the international community can take to foster these changes, it is really the responsibility of each individual, each community, to decide not to allow resentments or perceptions about others to rule their interactions with fellow humans. Related to this claim is Abdulaziz Sachedina's ideas on the Islamic criminalization of

apostasy, as described in *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism.*[246] One of the main reasons why minority groups are more susceptible to marginalization and diminished human rights is due to their exclusion from the communal Muslim identity. Sachedina states "as many conflicts around the world indicate, clashes of diverse cultures can become a major source of dehumanizing the other. Each tradition, armed with its self-awarded patent on divine revelation, seeks supremacy rather than accommodation when confronted with an alien faith."[247] Dehumanization, after all, is the basis for the violation of human rights. Following the logic of the basis of human rights, the fact that an individual or community is indeed constructed of humans, would indicate their entitlement to this set of human rights. When an individual or community is viewed as less than human, or more drastically, inhuman, based on their religious or ethnic traditions and backgrounds, those armed with their 'self-awarded' notions of validity feel justified in the degradation and/or outright negation of human rights. Sachedina's ideas regarding the criminalization of apostasy under Islamic law speaks to the civil societal tensions that inflame human rights violations in Iraq.

An important consideration when analyzing the rights of religious minorities are the drivers of the state's actions. Many times, the state is not acting without a powerful push from the population in which minority groups are situated. Human rights within Islamic law are often pushed from the civil society, not the state alone. We see examples

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[246] Sachedina, Abdulaziz. "The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism."
[247] Sachedina, Abdulaziz. "The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism."

of this in Iraq's political sphere, which, according to the State Department, maintains a

framework for basic freedoms such as freedom of thought and religion through the

constitution, but individual members, groups, and other legal provisions demonstrate

underlying sectarian and social divides that fuel divisiveness and the diminishment of

human rights. According to the State Department,

> The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religious belief
>
> and practice for all citizens and declares all Iraqis equal before the law without
>
> discrimination based on religion, sect, or belief. Apparent contradictions between
>
> the constitution and other legal provisions have not been tested in court and make
>
> unclear the full legal protection for religious freedom. Government regulations
>
> preventing the conversion of Muslims to other faiths, a law that forcibly converts
>
> minor children to Islam if either parent converts to Islam, laws and resolutions
>
> that outlaw the practice of some faiths, and a law that overrides religious tenets of
>
> individuals adhering to non-Muslim faiths with Islamic law principles remain.
>
> However, these regulations were not tested in court.[248]

This analysis from the Department of State shows us that although Islamic governments

have provisions in place to prevent degraded human rights towards minorities, there are

still tensions between groups that prevent these practices from being carried out the way

that they were intended. It is impossible for the Iraqi government to monitor each case of

human rights violations at the local level. This lack of oversight and protections at the

more local levels allow space for the degradation of human rights in practice, even if

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[248] U.S. Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report.

higher legal institutions have legally protected them. The space between the state and the community must be negotiated in a way that carries out the protections guaranteed by the constitution. The social context in which human rights violations are carried out is vitally important to understand if the aim is to reduce them in the future.

In order to combat this, the space between the state and community must be dealt with. In many cases, the state, when acting in a way that degrades human rights violations, is acting under the influence of pressure groups, whether they be religious or social, within the state. For example, religious groups put pressure on the state to make the point that certain actions will not be tolerated. In order to protect tolerance guaranteed in the constitution and legal provisions of states, the state must not take sides, especially when speaking of religious human rights violations. Their aim must not be to placate certain pressure groups, but to maintain the ideas of tolerance for which the laws/constitution/provisions were created.

In conclusion, the Yazidi community, in order to survive long-term in Iraq and abroad, must take action now to synthesize efforts and refine prioritization of reconstruction and rehabilitation. This research has aimed to bring more awareness to the plight of the Yazidi community and the specific nuances and hindrances to the recovery of the community, in hopes that these issues will not only be explored further, but used as a springboard in which to take actionable steps in the recovery of the community. It is my hope that this research is used to perpetuate further discussions on the welfare of the

community, and religious minorities more generally, to learn from the tragedies that ISIS

imposed on Iraq and Syria, and prevent similar situations in the future.

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