CASE 8. Genocide:

Targeted violence against the Yazidis from Sinjar (Iraq, 2014)

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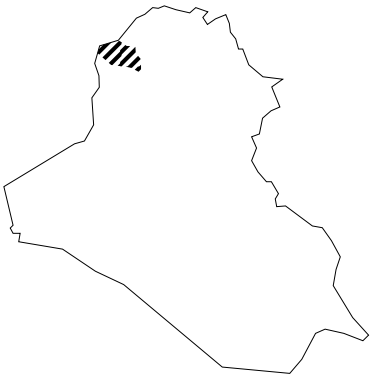
COUNTRY

Iraq



PERPETRATOR

ISIS

ACT

carried out military operations against the Yazidis, which included executions, sexual exploitation, forced recruitment and the destruction of cultural property

OBJECTIVES*

- to annihilate the Yazidi community

** As far as we have been able to discern; the list may not be exhaustive in this regard*

CONSEQUENCES

The death of thousands of Yazidis through executions, but also through forced dehydration as ISIS trapped people on Sinjar Mountain

The sexual abuse of thousands of women and girls

- ↳ causing psychological trauma
- ↳ leading to the social stigmatisation and exclusion of children born of rape

The forced recruitment of children

- ↳ causing psychological trauma and behavioural problems

Mass internal displacement

- ↳ decreasing access to income, education and medical care
  - ↳ leading to negative coping strategies, such as forced (early) marriages, reduced food intake

Large numbers of missing persons

In the early hours of 3 August 2014, fighters from the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) moved into Sinjar district, home to the world's largest Yazidi community. With the attack on Sinjar, the lives of many Yazidis changed irreversibly. While subjected to persecution by various Muslim rulers throughout history because of long-standing prejudices and notions of Yazidis as 'infidels' and 'devil-worshippers' (Otten, 2017), the events of 3 August were the start of a period of violence that would become one of the worst ever, decimating an already small and vulnerable minority.

Prior to the attack, Sinjar district, located in Iraq's northern Ninewa governorate and close to the border with Syria, held the largest community of Yazidis worldwide. Located directly under the Kurdish governorate of Dohuk, Sinjar is one of the so-called disputed territories: A group of administrative districts spread across four governorates that are formally under Iraqi authority, but to which the Kurdish region has lain claims (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2018). The district is divided into a northern and southern sector by the Sinjar Mountains, which span nearly 100 kilometres, and is home to a variety of communities besides the Yazidis, including Sunni Arabs, Sunni and Shia Turkomans, and Christians (PAX, 2015; Abouzeid, 2018). The Yazidis, Sinjar's majority population, are a Kurdish speaking community that practices an ancient religion containing elements of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[1] It is historically a rather closed group, as the Yazidi faith requires a child to have two Yazidi parents and forbids conversion (Abouzeid, 2018). Worldwide, the Yazidis now total less than one million: Before the attack, approximately 550,000 Yazidis resided in Iraq, mainly in Sinjar district, but also in Iraq's Kurdish region, with other substantial communities in Syria, Turkey, the US and Germany (Abouzeid, 2018).

8.1 Case: Trapped in the mountains

On the evening of 2 August 2014, Sinjar's Yazidis had no idea of the fate that would befall them mere hours later, and were gathering in public to celebrate the end of their fasting period, exchanging gossip and sweets. As evening fell, Yazidis in some towns and villages took note of the appearance of unfamiliar vehicles on the horizon, creating some unrest amid the festivities (Otten, 2017). Yet, overall, they felt protected by the presence of Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) forces – also known as Peshmerga – in the region (ICG, 2018).

In the months before, ISIS – in its efforts to establish an Islamic caliphate – had advanced into Syria and Iraq and, consequently, Sinjar district had become 'sandwiched' between ISIS-controlled areas in both countries; by August, only the KDP stood between ISIS and Sinjar, which was being besieged from three sides (ICG, 2018). When ISIS, with the aid of local Sunni supporters, finally moved into Sinjar district on 3 August, the militants encountered little armed resistance and could quickly overrun the territory. Unbeknownst to the Yazidis, most Peshmerga had withdrawn from the region as soon as ISIS attacked, leaving the Yazidis largely defenceless, and – because this decision had not been communicated publicly – largely unaware of the scope of the threat ahead of them (ICG, 2018; UN Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2016).

In the fighting and chaos that ensued, about 100,000 Yazidis managed to escape to the Sinjar Mountains; most of those who did not manage to

get away on time, got rounded up and were either kept captive or killed on the spot (Abouzeid, 2018; Otten, 2017).[2] Reports soon began to emerge about horrendous acts of violence committed against the Yazidis. ISIS may have killed as many as 10,000 civilians, and terrorised women, girls, men and boys through various forms of sexual, physical and psychological violence (UN Assistance Mission for Iraq [UNAMI] & UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2014). Using checkpoints and patrols, ISIS militants were able to move quickly and emptied most of Sinjar's villages from Yazidis in a mere 72 hours (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019).

One such village was Kocho, located to the south of the mountains. What happened there is representative of what happened throughout Sinjar. After having taken over the settlement, ISIS militants herded the circa 1,200 residents together in a school, where they subsequently separated the men from the women and younger children. Militants proceeded to lead hundreds of men and teenage boys out of the school and toward the outskirts of the village, where ISIS executed its victims by gunfire, within earshot of the Yazidi women and children still locked in the school (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019; Abouzeid, 2018). One man who was able to escape after he was left for dead, remembered that:

> *[ISIS] took away […] vehicles full of men and youth. We were driven a very short distance east, maybe 200 – 300 metres. […] We were 20 or 25 crammed in the back of the pick-up, I don't know for sure. When we got there they made us stand in a row and then one of them shouted "God is great" ["Allahu Akbar"] and then there was shooting. (Rovera, 2014)*

Some of the elderly women too were killed in Kocho, whereas younger women and children – about 500 to 700 in all – were taken to ISIS territory, from where ISIS 'gifted' or sold them as sex slaves or, in the case of older boys, sent them to military training camps (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019; Abouzeid, 2018). By 2019, approximately 600 of Kocho's Yazidis had escaped captivity, yet none have returned to the village (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019).

The situation for the tens of thousands of Yazidis that had sought refuge in the Sinjar Mountains was not much more hopeful at first: As soon as the Yazidis fled into the mountains, ISIS began its siege, effectively trapping thousands of civilians on the mountain's upper plateau (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019; UNHRC, 2016). What followed was a humanitarian catastrophe: At the mercy of the blazing sun and temperatures of 50 degrees Celsius and above, people were at severe risk of dehydration and starvation, as well as remaining exposed to attacks by ISIS (Abouzeid, 2018). A man trapped on the mountain managed to get the report out that, 'People walk the length of the mountain with no food and water and some have resorted to eating leaves of the trees' (Rudaw, 2014). Recognising the plight of these civilians, American, Iraqi, French, Australian and British forces conducted air drops of water and other supplies (UNHRC, 2016). This nonetheless could not prevent hundreds of Yazidis – predominantly infants and children – dying in the mountains from dehydration (UNHRC, 2016; Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019). It took a coordinated effort by US air forces and the on-the-ground Syrian Kurdish troops, the People's Protection Units or YPG, to eventually create an evacuation route along which Yazidis – after being trapped for more than a week – could enter from the mountains into Syria, and from there into the Kurdish region of Iraq (Abouzeid, 2018; ICG, 2018; Kikoler, 2015).

In addition to the horrific numbers of Yazidis killed and abducted, an estimated 200,000 civilians became displaced after ISIS invaded Sinjar and had to live, or continue to live, in often dire conditions. Large parts of Sinjar

district itself were recaptured from ISIS by late 2015 by a combination of KDP and Kurdistan Workers' Party-affiliated fighters (PKK), with air support from the International Coalition against ISIS; by 2017, the district was cleared from ISIS entirely as Iraqi forces and Iraqi-sponsored Hashd al-Shaabi militias (also known as Popular Mobilisation Forces) moved in (Abouzeid, 2018).

8.2 Perpetrators: Intent on the destruction of a people

ISIS' treatment of the Yazidis has been based on extremist interpretations of Islam. ISIS' views interpret Yazidism as an inferior religion and its practitioners as idol and devil worshippers. Such discrimination is not new: Yazidis have been subjected to persecution and discrimination throughout history, and many survivors have described ISIS' attack as the 73rd or 74th faith-based attempt to annihilate their community (Abouzeid, 2018). Part of their marginalisation lies in their worshipping of a fallen angel, Melek Tawwus ('Peacock Angel'), which some Muslims – including ISIS – consider a satanic figure (Jalabi, 2014; Carbajal et al., 2017; International Federation for Human Rights [FIDH] & Kinyat, 2018). ISIS moreover wrongly regards the Yazidis as *mushrikin* (polytheists and idol worshippers), and perceives polytheism as a threat and insult to its strictly monotheistic interpretation of Islam (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019).

In an article in its English-language magazine Dabiq (2014) – published prior to the attack on Sinjar – ISIS set out how Yazidis should be dealt with; its attack on Sinjar was thus preceded by discourse on religious interpretation, which ISIS militants used to legitimise their abject treatment of the Yazidi people. It moreover 'determined the behavior of its fighters during the attack on Sinjar and their subsequent abuse of Yazidi men, women and children', according to the UN-commissioned Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (UNHRC, 2016, p. 29). The armed group's distinct treatment of each of these categories of Yazidi victims, shows how systematic its approach was to purposefully destroying an entire community.

Violence against men: Upon arrival in Sinjar, ISIS militants systematically separated Yazidis into three groups: men and boys aged approximately twelve and above; women and children; and boys aged seven and above (UNHRC, 2016). The report by the Independent Commission describes how, after separation, male Yazidis were executed by gunfire or beheaded. In several instances, the women and children who were held captive near execution sites witnessed the executions themselves. Most killings occurred in groups of between two and twenty men and boys. There are, however, also documented cases of larger mass killings, for instance in the villages Kocho and Qani (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019). In Kocho, out of hundreds of men just nineteen survived, in many cases hidden beneath the corpses of their friends and relatives. Other men and boys have reported that they converted under coercion and were forced to work in construction projects, to dig trenches, or to take care of cattle. They were not allowed to leave the villages and were counted regularly; those who tried to escape were beaten on the first attempt and executed on the second (UNHRC, 2016).

Violence against women: After ISIS had separated the women and girls from the men, it brought them to temporary holding sites in or near the Iraqi cities Tal Afar and Mosul (UNHRC, 2016). ISIS fighters from these cities commanded the sites, and oversaw the transfer of some Yazidi girls and women from the sites in Iraq to ISIS-held territory in Syria. Once at the holding sites, ISIS at first separated the married from the unmarried women, allowing girls under the age of eight to stay with their mothers. Not surprisingly,

'surmising that the greatest danger lay in being placed in the group of unmarried females, unmarried women and girls pretended their younger siblings or nephews or nieces were their own children' (UNHRC, 2016, p. 10). ISIS members numbered the women and girls or recorded their names, and inspected them to evaluate their beauty. Some women and girls were given away as 'gifts', while others were sold to ISIS fighters. This was a highly systematised practice:

> *Women were then sold in markets, either electronically over a mobile phone messenger app where their photos and slave numbers were exchanged, or in market halls and prisons at prearranged times. Away from the main markets, women and girls, supplied by fighters or Isis members who acted as middlemen, were sold by local brokers in smaller numbers. At the beginning, they were given mainly to Iraqi fighters who took part in the battle for Sinjar. Subsequently, the remaining captives were taken to Syria, and sold there, often to fighters who had arrived from around the world. (Otten, 2017)*

ISIS did this to girls as young as nine years old, and with the explicit purpose to keep the women and girls as slaves for sex and labour (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019). ISIS argued it could rightfully do so because Yazidi females are not Muslim and, as their unbelieving men have been killed, ISIS militants instead must take care of them (FIDH & Kinyat, 2018; Ali, 2015; Otten, 2017). At the same time, ISIS has also used slavery as a way of rewarding and recruiting militants, and as a means to 'create' new generations of ISIS fighters through rape (Otten, 2017).

Once sold or given away, many of the women and girls would be subjected to sexual, physical and other forms of abuse. Women and girls interviewed by investigators stressed that once they were captured, they had no choice over where they were taken, what happened to any children they had, to whom they were sold and resold, and how they were treated (UNHRC, 2016). Their 'owners' forced the women to do household labour, and when women and girls were held in the fighters' houses, they were sometimes forced to take care of the fighters' children and to assist the wives as well. According to one survivor, Yazidi females were sometimes sold up to 50 times, and sometimes just for an hour at a time (Arraf, 2019). Another survivor, an at the time 12-year-old Yazidi girl who was sold four times, describes how ISIS selected their victims:

> *We were registered. ISIS took our names, ages, where we came from and whether we were married or not. After that, ISIS fighters would come to select girls to go with them. The youngest girl I saw them take was about 9 years old. One girl told me that 'if they try to take you, it is better that you kill yourself'. (UNHRC, 2016, p. 10)*

Violence against children: ISIS let some of the children who were young enough stay with their mothers. As such, the children were often witness to the violence perpetrated against their mothers, and/or were subjected to physical labour and violence themselves (UNHRC, 2016). ISIS subjected older boys – generally over the age of seven – to different treatment: After separation of the others, ISIS sent such boys to training camps where they were given Muslim names, indoctrinated in ISIS ideology, and received weapons and physical training (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019; Giblin & Dartas, 2018). The UN Human Rights Council report provides insights into the daily reality of these boys:

> *The Yazidi boys are forced to attend indoctrination and military training sessions led by ISIS fighters acting as instructors […] The boys' daily programme consists of sessions in Quranic recitation*

> *as well as military exercises, including being taught to use AK47s, hand grenades, and Rocket Propelled Grenades. The boys are forced to watch ISIS-made propaganda videos of armed battles, beheadings, and suicide missions. ISIS instructors also hold sessions for the boys on 'Jihad' and the importance of participating in ISIS's war against 'the unbelievers'. If the boys fail to memorize Quranic verses or perform poorly in training sessions, they are beaten. (UNHRC, 2016, p. 19)*

Even though they were just children, ISIS sent such boys to the frontlines to fight or on suicide missions; some boys reported they were drugged before fighting, making them reckless, and were forced to lead the charge, so they – instead of ISIS fighters – would be killed first (Stoter Boscolo, 2019). ISIS shot numerous propaganda videos with these 'cubs of the caliphate', which show the boys participating in military exercises or executing prisoners (Stoter Boscolo, 2019; Giblin & Dartas, 2018).

8.3 Victims: A scattered and scarred community

Various groups within the Yazidi community – the primary target of the August 2014 attack on Sinjar – have suffered distinct violations and harm at the hands of ISIS, based on its ideological framework (UNHRC, 2016; Cetorelli et al., 2017). There are varying estimates concerning the numbers of Yazidis killed, displaced and missing. Generally, it is agreed upon that from the 550,000 Yazidis that were estimated to live in Iraq, about 360,000 were displaced as of 2018; between 2,000-10,000 Yazidis were killed in Sinjar either by execution or by dehydration or starvation in the mountains; approximately 6,400 Yazidis from Sinjar were abducted; and, that by 2018, about 3,300 Yazidis had escaped or otherwise returned from captivity, while some 3,100 people – mostly women and children – remained unaccounted for and were likely either dead or still held captive in Iraq or Syria (Cetorelli et al., 2017; Hawar News, 2018; Abouzeid, 2018; Otten, 2017; UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019).

Yet, these figures may never tell the complete story. Whole families have been exterminated, sometimes leaving no one to testify about the violence. The incredible scope of the violence is also reflected in the number of mass graves found in Sinjar district: 68 by 2018 (Hawar News, 2018). Some survivors provide testimony how such mass graves came to be. One of them, a 46-year-old man recalls: 'I survived, until now I don't know how […] The bullets were raining around me. It happened during the day, around noon. They brought a bulldozer to bury us. I realised I was alive' (Abouzeid, 2018, p. 7).

However, it is important to note that the harm for the Yazidis did not end with ISIS' defeat or removal from the region. Many of the Yazidis who managed to escape the violence in Sinjar in August 2014 or who have returned from captivity since, ended up displaced (ICG, 2018). The majority of Yazidi internally displaced persons (IDPs) are located in northern Iraq's Kurdish region; there are fourteen IDP camps in Dohuk governorate alone (Akram, 2020; Abouzeid, 2018). Yet, official figures should be viewed with some scepticism, as many Yazidis are not registered at camps but live in unfinished or abandoned buildings, or rented accommodation (UNHCR, 2019). Their problems are manifold: Life in IDP camps can be dangerous in the case of extreme weather conditions; the camps have persistent problems regarding inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure; displaced Yazidis are often unable to find regular income and, consequently, cannot pay for accommodation, education, and healthcare; and about one-third of IDP children in the camps and a quarter of those living outside the IDP camps do not have access to formal education (UNHCR, 2019). The UN High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2019) warns that lack of education puts children at increased risk of child labour, early marriage, mental distress, and recruitment by armed groups. Overall, the dire living conditions of many displaced Yazidis have led to so-called 'negative coping strategies', whereby civilians may incur debt, reduce their food intake, or force their children into early marriages or labour, in order to get by.

Even though the area around Sinjar district has been liberated from ISIS control, many Yazidis are unwilling to return to their former homes. There are practical concerns that impede return: Sinjar district is full of unexploded ordnances and has been heavily booby-trapped by ISIS (Abouzeid, 2018). In addition, the conflict has effectively put water, energy and healthcare-related infrastructure out of operation, and has negatively affected education and work opportunities (Abouzeid, 2018; Jesuit Refugee Service [JRS], 2018). But the conflict has also deepened social cleavages: Many Yazidis believe they were betrayed by their Arab neighbours and fear discrimination upon return; many Arab communities, in turn, perceive themselves unjustly and excessively scapegoated (Abouzeid, 2018). A Yazidi man indicated that, 'If you live surrounded by enemies, it's difficult […] When the government is weak, we will be attacked again' (Abouzeid, 2018, pp. 24-25). A survey conducted among Yazidi IDPs in 2019 found that only three per cent of respondents indicated any intention to return to Sinjar within the next year (UNHCR, 2019).[3]

Another worrying form of long-term harm concerns the high levels of mental trauma among Yazidi survivors, evident for instance in high suicide rates, and widespread post-traumatic distress disorder, behavioural disorders, and depression (JRS, 2018). Many people were exposed to horrific sights and the most intense negative experiences. A Yazidi girl recalls that,

> *After we were captured, ISIS forced us to watch them beheading some of our Yazidi men. They made the men kneel in a line in the street, with their hands tied behind their backs. The ISIS fighters took knives and cut their throats. (UNHRC, 2016, p. 8)*

The Independent Commission found that many women and children who have returned from ISIS captivity suffer from enduring psychological distress: 'Most [Yazidi women and girls] spoke of thoughts of suicide, of being unable to sleep due to nightmares about ISIS fighters at their door […] [,] of feeling angry and hopeless' (UNHCR, 2019, p. 16). While there are no accurate figures, survivors have testified that, also during captivity, there were women and girls who ended or attempted to end their own lives (UNHRC, 2016). And, even though ISIS has now largely been defeated, there are still women and children held captive, most of them in Syria; occasional reports – as recent as May 2020 – continue to appear from Yazidis that after years of captivity have finally managed to escape (The National, 2020). The exact scope of this problem remains unclear.

Formerly captive children display mental trauma through bed-wetting, nightmares, and sudden rages; researchers from the Independent Commission in particular noted that many children had become problematically protective of their mothers whenever unfamiliar men were around (UNHRC, 2016). In addition, many children show excessively violent behaviour and – especially the younger ones who were more vulnerable to indoctrination – sometimes voice extremist views (Stoter Boscolo, 2019). While psychosocial support for returnees is criticised as insufficient in general (UNHCR, 2019), the plight of traumatised children appears especially prone to being overlooked:

> *[T]here is limited psychosocial support available that is directly targeted at*

> *the needs of these children. Many Yazidi families, themselves direct victims of ISIS violations, are struggling to understand and to cope with the behaviour of their severely traumatised children. (UNHRC, 2016, p. 18)*

Sometimes, mental harm is communally inflicted. While Yazidi spiritual leaders have taken important steps in ensuring that formerly enslaved women would be welcomed back into their families without judgment, it has shown no such willingness to accept children born of rape during ISIS captivity (Abouzeid, 2018; UNHCR, 2019; Oppenheim, 2019).[4] Some women have been forced to abandon their children fathered by ISIS militants, whereas others have chosen to keep them, suffering from social ostracization as a result (Oppenheim, 2019). For many of these women, who are not given a voice in such decision-making processes around their own children, the forced abandonment has caused additional mental trauma. According to a psychologist who works with Yazidi women in an IDP camp in Khanke, this has been a reason for some women to stay behind: 'They stay with the Isis [*sic*] families because they know the [Yazidi] community does not accept the children' (Oppenheim, 2019).

8.4 Significance: Lack of justice and an uncertain future

The attack on Sinjar by ISIS and the violence against the Yazidis that followed represent a case of intended large-scale annihilation of a community. ISIS has sought to destroy the Yazidi community in multiple ways, including through mass executions, enslavement, sexual slavery, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, and the forced conversion and transfer of Yazidi children to ISIS fighters. The latter was meant to cut off the children from the beliefs and practices of their own religious community, thereby erasing their identity as Yazidis (Otten, 2017; Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019). The Independent Commission has described the sexual violence committed by ISIS against Yazidi women and girls, and the serious physical and mental harm it engendered, as a clear 'step in the process of destruction of the […] group – destruction of the spirit, of the will to live, and of life itself' (UNHRC, 2016, p. 24). ISIS moreover deliberately and systematically destroyed shrines and other sites of religious and cultural significance for the Yazidis in an attempt to eradicate the community's religious, physical and material culture (UNAMI & OHCHR, 2016).

The events fitted a larger strategy: ISIS has systematically targeted and persecuted the Yazidis – and other ethnic and religious groups – as part of a policy aimed at suppressing, permanently expelling or destroying many of these communities within ISIS areas of control. What set apart the violence against the Yazidis from those against other communities, was its outspoken genocidal character. Whereas so-called 'people of the Book' (Jews and Christians) could generally avoid forced conversion or death by paying a specific tax, Yazidis were excluded from such practices.

According to Naomi Kikoler, Director of the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, all this shows that ISIS' 'actions were calculated with the intent of destroying the community and thereby different from its attacks against other minorities, which were part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing' (Kikoler, 2015, p. 15). The Independent Commission similarly concluded in 2016 that 'ISIS has committed and continues to commit, the crime of genocide, as well as multiple crimes against humanity and war crimes, against the Yazidis' (UNHRC, 2016, p. 36). Other inter-governmental organisations and governments have recognised

the crimes by ISIS against the Yazidis as genocide as well (Yazda, n.d.).

The UN Security Council acknowledged the importance of bringing those responsible to justice, and established an Investigative Team to gather facts and evidence against ISIS for their actions in Iraq (UN Security Council, 2017). Yet, prosecution for genocide so far has been limited. Germany commenced trial of two parallel cases in 2020, of an Iraqi and his wife, for amongst other charges, war crimes and genocide (El-Hitami, 2020). In the US, a case is ongoing against the wife of a deceased ISIS leader, among other things for her role in the captivity and treatment of Yazidi women (Clooney, 2019). These are the first trials against ISIS. It is unlikely that in the short term the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) will be invoked over the genocide against the Yazidis: Neither Syria nor Iraq has ratified the ICC Statute, meaning the ICC has no jurisdiction over crimes committed by ISIS in these countries. The other option – referral to the ICC by the UN – has been blocked by China and Russia (Masadeh, 2020). There is an internationally backed call for the establishment of a separate tribunal for ISIS, which would encompass genocidal acts against the Yazidis – but this is yet to materialise and it may take many more years to bring perpetrators to justice (Government of the Netherlands, 2019; BBC News, 2019; Clooney, 2019; Dworkin, 2019).

In the meantime, while ISIS has been (largely) defeated but not yet brought to justice, Yazidis continue to struggle with the aftermath of the conflict. The atrocities committed against the Yazidis by ISIS have consequences beyond their direct harm and beyond the borders of Sinjar. Many long-term effects of the harm inflicted upon this people are discussed above: the many dead and missing, trauma, non-acceptance of children born from Yazidi women and their ISIS captors back into the community, and the destruction of cultural heritage. The majority of Yazidis live a difficult and impoverished existence in IDP camps throughout the Kurdish region of Iraq (UNAMI & OHCHR, 2016; Peyre-Costa & Jenssen, 2018; UNHRC, 2016). Many families remain separated and there are many women and girls still missing. IDP communities from Ninewa are highly disillusioned by the lack of protection by either the Iraqi Army or the Kurdish Peshmerga. Some Yazidis wish to develop their own militias on religious or ethnic basis, something that poses a serious threat to return scenarios, may facilitate revenge, and fuel renewed hostilities (PAX, 2015). Most Ninewa communities depend on support from non-governmental organisations or their own networks for food provision, education programs and psychosocial support activities. Yazidi cultural heritage and identity have been severely damaged (Weizman, 2018). Our search for the sake of this article for updated figures on the return of Yazidis and numbers of victims made it clear that the plight of the Yazidis is slowly moving to the background of the public's interest; it was a challenge to find clear figures of more recent date than 2019.

In this context, and in the absence of clear prospects for return, IDP communities look for resettlement abroad. Many Yazidis have decided to leave the country. However, many of them cannot take legal routes out of Iraq as identification documents were left behind or destroyed during their flight, and getting new documents is a complex, bureaucratic process. The fees involved are beyond the reach of many, who have subsequently turned to smugglers and have made dangerous journeys by land or boat. Not everyone has survived these journeys, creating even more missing persons in the already scattered community. Can a broken, dispersed people and a faith survive in diaspora alone? 'Without their traditions […], Yazidis have only memories. After ISIS, some Yazidis no longer want those either' (Beck, 2020).

Images

Iraqi Yazidi refugees in Newroz camp, Syria. Many of the camp's refugees had escaped ISIS in Sinjar, some of them having had to walk up to 60 kilometres in the heat and through the Sinjar mountains to find their way to the camp.

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Endnotes

1 The Yazidis' communal affiliation is a subject of disagreement: Kurds and some Yazidis consider them Kurdish, whereas most Yazidis perceive of themselves as a distinct ethno-religious community and reject what they consider treatment as second-class Kurds (PAX, 2015; ICG, 2018).

2 100,000 seems the most commonly cited number, although there are also reports that mention 200,000 Yazidis seeking refuge in the mountains, such as Kikoler (2015, p. 15).

3 UNHCR found the following reasons to mostly impede return: presence of mines (42 per cent); lack of security forces (41 per cent); damaged/destroyed homes (33 per cent); fear of discrimination (29 per cent); and lack of financial means to return (13 per cent) (UNHCR, 2019, pp. 10-11).

4 This has to do with Yazidi beliefs that children need to have two Yazidi parents in order to be Yazidi and considered part of the community.