

Resolving the Ongoing Suppression of the Yazidis

Written by Karzan Aziz Mahmood

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KARZAN AZIZ MAHMOOD, OCT 20 2024

The Yazidis, an ethno-religious minority predominantly found in the mountainous areas of Iraqi Kurdistan, possess a history that is historically both rich and tragic. On the first, their distinctive faith, which incorporates aspects of Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity, and ancient Mesopotamian traditions, surviving based on its endurance, resistance, and independence, has set itself apart from the surrounding communities for centuries. However, this uniqueness, on the other hand, has rendered the Yazidis vulnerable to severe persecution and violence throughout their history. A harrowing episode of this ongoing oppression against them was the genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014.

After 2014, debates over the ethnic origins of the Yazidis have intensified, especially following ISIS's attempt to annihilate them. Some groups have tried to label them as Kurds, while others claim they are Arabs, as if their crisis stems from a lack of a clear identity or heritage. According to Christine Allison (2014), for instance, the Yazidis are a Kurdish-speaking religious minority of about 500,000 people; primarily residing in Iraq after centuries of inhabiting regions across Turkey, Syria, and Iran. However, some other sources argue that the Yazidis are of Arab origin, but this debate over their ethnicity offers them little benefit. Whether labeled as Kurdish or Arab, they remain vulnerable to Islamic ideological threats in the region. As a non-Abrahamic religion, they are often viewed as "the other," with many labeling them as "devil worshippers," which has led to their demonization and persecution. Birgül Açıkyıldız argues that both European and Islamic scholars have wrongly equated the Peacock Angel, or Melek Tawus, with the devil from Abrahamic religions. For the Yazidis, however, Melek Tawus is one of seven holy beings entrusted by God, not a version of the devil. This misconception fueled ISIS's justification for their genocide, accusing the Yazidis of being "non-believers" and "infidels."

Continuous assaults have scattered, dwindled and marginalized the Yazidis during the past 100 years. During the Ottoman Empire, Yazidis were often targeted for their beliefs, facing numerous attempts at forced conversion to Islam. This cycle of persecution persisted under various regimes, including that of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist government. Under Hussein, the Yazidis experienced Arabization efforts. In the late 1960s, for instance, the Ba'athist governments forced hundreds of thousands of the Yazidis move, confiscated their property, and destroyed 200 Yazidi villages in Sinjar. Thousands of the Yazidis were then relocated in newly built collective towns, known as the Mujamma'at, which are located far from fields and villages belonging to them (4). This made easy the suppression of any kind of organized political opposition to the government of Iraq in northern parts of the country.

The most notable persecution was during the 2014 ISIS attack on Mount Sinjar, which resulted in massacres and enslavement. The community, now largely displaced, grapples with threats to its traditional practices and identity, as younger generations seek justice and modernization amid a challenging diaspora experience. ISIS, perceiving the Yazidis as heretics, rationalized their brutal actions through an extremist ideology that advocated for the annihilation of those who did not adhere to their specific interpretation of Islam. ISIS killed over 5,000 Yazidis, forced the abduction of over 7,000 women and children-many of these were sold into slavery and suffered terrible abuses. Close to 400,000 Yazidis fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as tens of thousands were stranded on Sinjar Mountain with very minimal sustenance. Cut off from all means of escape by ISIS fighters, mass executions, forced conversions, and systematic sexual violence occurred. As a result, in 2016, the UN, together with a number of international human rights organizations and various governments, described the atrocities as acts of genocide. This recognition was supported by the clear intent to destroy the Yazidi people, their culture, and their faith.

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The repercussions of the genocide have left the Yazidi community in ruins. Thousands of Yazidis remain unaccounted for, and those who survived are burdened with profound psychological trauma. A study (2020), conducted to investigate the long-term psychological effects on Yazidi women who survived sexual violence and other forms of persecution by ISIS, reveals a high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among the survivors, illustrating the profound mental health challenges they face. The physical and emotional wounds inflicted by the genocide run deep, and the Yazidi community continues to confront the grief of lost loved ones, displacement, and the persistent threat of violence.

Local and international communities have somewhat acknowledged the pressing necessity to assist the Yazidis in their recovery. Yet, substantial efforts are still required to guarantee the long-term safety, peace, and welfare of this community. A pivotal measure involves ensuring that those accountable for the genocide face justice. This entails prosecuting ISIS militants for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Although Iraq is not a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC), preventing the ICC from directly holding the state accountable for the Yazidi genocide, alternative legal routes exist. The ICC can gain jurisdiction if the UN Security Council refers the case or if individuals responsible are nationals of member states or committed crimes on member state territory. Additionally, universal jurisdiction allows other countries to prosecute perpetrators of the genocide, ensuring that justice can still be pursued through international mechanisms even if Iraq itself cannot be directly held responsible by the ICC.

Moreover, The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) could be held responsible for its role in the Yazidi genocide if an impartial investigation finds that its withdrawal of Peshmerga forces from Sinjar in 2014, without resistance, knowingly enabled ISIS's genocidal campaign. Such an investigation would need to determine whether the KDP's actions—or lack thereof—contributed to ISIS's ability to capture Sinjar and target the Yazidis. If evidence shows that the KDP's withdrawal facilitated ISIS's atrocities, the party could face accountability under international law for failing to protect civilians and potentially aiding the genocide by omission.

To facilitate their recovery, it is crucial to offer reparations and compensation. This may encompass financial support for survivors, alongside assistance in reconstructing homes, educational institutions, and places of worship that were ravaged by ISIS. Collaborative efforts between governments and international organizations are essential to create effective mechanisms for delivering these reparations. It is also imperative to offer mental health services that are both culturally appropriate and readily accessible to all Yazidis. This initiative should encompass the training of local healthcare professionals, the establishment of counseling facilities, and the provision of long-term support to facilitate the healing process for survivors.

The safety of the Yazidi community necessitates addressing the persistent threats from remnants of ISIS and other extremist factions in the area. International forces, in collaboration with the Iraqi government and Kurdish authorities, and also strong commitment from the local people as they are relatively impacted by some fundamental discourses and practices, must sustain their efforts to dismantle these groups and avert any further assaults on Yazidi populations. Furthermore, it is critical to ensure the safety of displaced Yazidis residing not only in camps but their homes by providing adequate security and preventing any coercive repatriation to hazardous regions.

Education and cultural preservation are both essential for empowering the Yazidi community and helping them recover from the atrocities they have endured. For example, creating educational opportunities for Yazidi children and young adults, many of whom were denied schooling during the ISIS occupation, is vital. This includes building and staffing schools, offering scholarships, and developing vocational training programs that equip them with skills to rebuild their lives and contribute to their communities. Equally important is the preservation of Yazidi culture and identity, as the genocide targeted not only the population but also their cultural and religious heritage. Documenting Yazidi history, language, and religious customs, as well as promoting cultural activities like festivals, art, and music, is crucial for the community's healing process. International organizations can support these efforts by providing funding and ensuring that the Yazidi culture is passed on to future generations.

Resettlement and integration are critical challenges for many Yazidis, as returning to their homes in Sinjar remains unfeasible due to ongoing insecurity and infrastructure destruction. Resettlement programs must prioritize the most vulnerable, including survivors of sexual violence, orphans, and those with medical needs, while ensuring their

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integration into new communities with access to housing, employment, and social services. Alongside this, advocacy and awareness efforts are essential to keep the Yazidi genocide and their current struggles at the forefront of international attention. Global advocacy should push for continued support from governments and international organizations, promote initiatives like the International Day of Commemoration of the Yazidi Genocide, and ensure Yazidi voices are included in discussions on human rights and genocide prevention. Additionally, the history of the Yazidi genocide and other oppressed peoples in the region should be incorporated into Iraqi and Kurdish educational curricula, fostering understanding and preventing future atrocities.

Discrimination Law, or the absence of anti-discrimination laws in Iraq and Kurdistan, allows for ongoing atrocities against the Yazidis and other minority groups. Hate speech and other forms of degrading and discriminatory treatment continue to be directed at these communities. This highlights the urgent need for the enactment of discrimination laws to protect these vulnerable groups. However, the current serious attempts of the Kurdistan Center for International Law towards such a law project should be supported, especially to mitigate or prevent cases such as this one.

The narrative of the Yazidi people exemplifies the enduring strength of a community that has endured centuries of oppression and violence. The atrocities committed by ISIS mark a profoundly tragic period in their history. However, this event does not signify the conclusion of the Yazidi experience, as the underlying factors of their persecution and genocide remain prevalent. With adequate support from local, regional, and global entities, the Yazidis have the potential to reconstruct their lives, safeguard their cultural heritage, and seek justice for the heinous acts they have suffered. By tackling the fundamental issues contributing to their plight and supplying essential resources for healing, local and international communities, governments such as Baghdad and Erbil, various religions and ethnicities of Kurdistan, Iraq, and the region can assist the Yazidis in breaking free from the cycle of oppression and fostering a future characterized by peace and security.

About the author:

Dr Karzan Aziz Mahmood holds a Ph.D in English Literature and Creative Translation from Jaume I University. He is a writer, translator, researcher, and journalist – in Kurdish and English. His fields of interest are philosophy, political-economy, literary theory/criticism, and creative writing. He is originally from Iraq and currently lives in Canada.