

The Status of the Yazidis: Eight Years on from the ISIS Genocide



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Who are the Yazidis?

The Yazidis are a religious group settled predominantly in northern Iraq around the Sinjar mountains, located in the disputed territory of the Sinjar region, which is geographically between the Kurdistan region and central Iraq. They are a double minority community in much of the

Middle East and have resided in or around the Sinjar mountains and northern Iraq for centuries. Though most of the Yazidis are Kurdish in ethnicity and speak the Kurdish language (Kurmanji), religiously they are very [distinct](#) from the majority Sunni Kurdish population.^[1] As [minorities](#), the Yazidis prefer to be recognized as an ethnic group, distinctly separate from the Kurds because of their cultural and religious differences.^[2]

The religion of Yazidism is somewhat complicated, which is a reason it is [misunderstood so](#) easily. Yazidism mixes elements from Islam, Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, ancient Persian faiths, and Mithraism (a near-eastern faith that was very popular amongst the Roman legionnaires) to form their faith. This syncretism, which is an amalgamation of various faiths is often a subject of heavy criticism, and as a result, the Yazidis are considered heretics by the fundamentalist Muslims. Unlike other religious minorities in the Near East, they are considered devil worshippers by many Muslims for their worship of Tawusi Melek, an angel who resists God to be a [link to the divine](#) for humans or that God left the management of the world to the seven archangels, among whom Tawusi Melek enjoys the highest stature.

The Yazidi faith never practices proselytizing and its religion is one of orthopraxy with a focus on living life according to a set of rules rather than focusing on personal beliefs or scriptures. This means that many of the Yazidi traditions are transmitted orally through songs called [qawls](#).^[3] Because of this, the Yazidis culture is conservative in its social rules. Besides a strict caste system that defines Yazidi social and religious life, there are various other taboos too that are integral to Yazidism. The Yazidis also have a very strict set of rules about marriage because of the caste system. There is a belief among the Yazidis passed down from Sheik Adi Ibn Musafir that they are pure and therefore can only marry within the community. In fact, marriage outside the community is punishable by [death](#). In 2007, Yazidis committed an honor killing when a 16-year-old Yazidi girl married a Muslim man and converted to Islam. This focus on maintaining ethnic cohesion by preventing intermarriage and relative isolation from the majority Arab population are the frontline reasons why there are many misconceptions about the Yazidis. It became a big issue for the upper echelons of the Yazidis following ISIS's ethnic cleansing campaign against them.

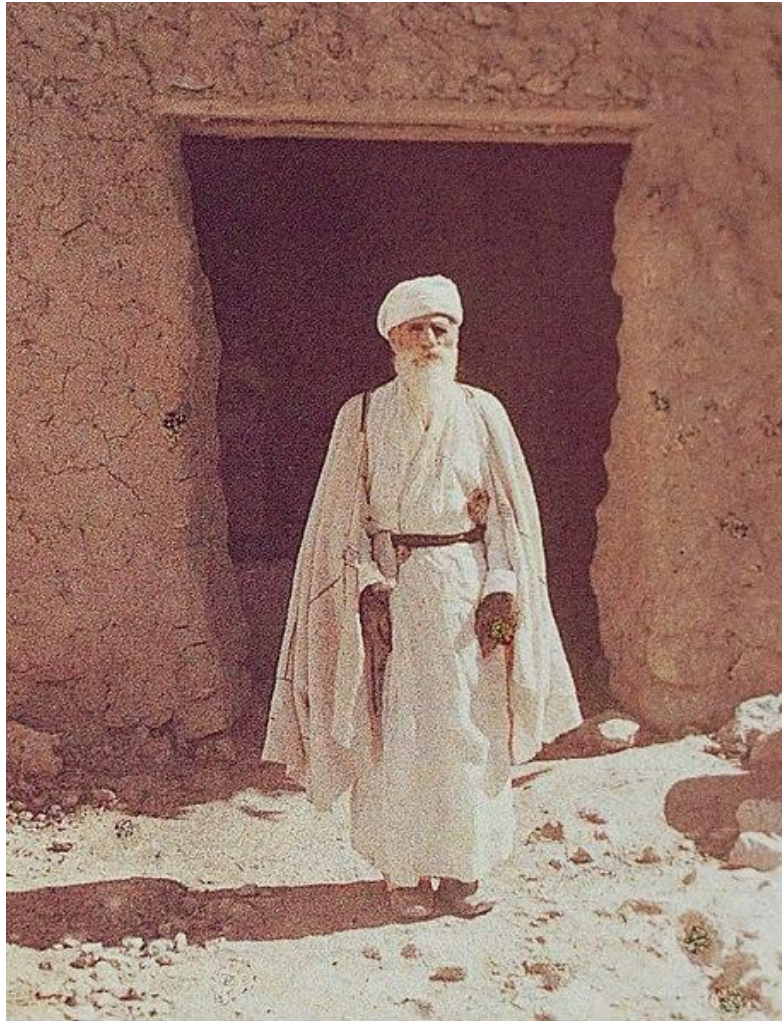
There are also strict rules around intermarriage within the Yazidis because of the caste system. The three castes are the Sheiks, Murids (laymen), and Pyir (clergy). While marriage is only allowed within the class, the subcaste factor makes the marriage laws of the Yazidis

further complicated. The Sheiks and Pyirs fulfill the clerical duties of the communities, but the principal ranks are drawn from the Sheiks and the Pyirs fill in the lower-level religious and political positions. In terms of religious ranks, the highest position is enjoyed by Baba Chawish who presides over all Yazidi religious ceremonies, and in the political sphere, the leader is known as the Mir. The Yazidis also believe in a form of reincarnation called [transmigration](#) in which after death the spirit of the individual remains in the community through successive incarnations. According to the Yazidis, they have been targeted for extermination as many as [72](#) times for their faith and ethnicity. Historically, millions of Yazidis have been killed for their faith in these 72 purges.

Throughout history, the Yazidis have been targeted by various kingdoms, either through displacement, ethnic cleansing, or war because they are believed to be devil worshippers. The Yazidi faith can be traced back to the Kurdish mountains of northern Iraq, where [pockets](#) of Kurds remained loyal to the Umayyad dynasty after its fall.^[4] They remained loyal because the last King of the Umayyad dynasty was of Kurdish descent, and after its fall some of the descendants of this dynasty [settled](#) in the area. The origins of the Yazidi faith are believed to begin with the settling of a Sufi sheik named Adī Ibn Musāfir, an orthodox Sufi known as the Adwiyah, whose teachings blended with local traditions. During the 15th century, Muslim rulers in Mosul and other areas of the Middle East began to view the Yazidis' [growing](#) religious and political power as a threat to the Muslim establishment. In response to this rise, a series of massacres and conversions, both forced and voluntary began that led to many Yazidis fleeing to the Caucasus mountains. There the community exercised considerable influence during the [16th century](#) under the Ottomans and enjoyed vassalage of the province of Soran, located from Erbil to the Jazira region of Syria.^[5]

Yazidi influence, however, waned during the late 18th century because [conversions](#) to Islam were frequent, and due to changes in the Ottoman law that targeted them and the Christian minority groups for religious persecution. This persecution led to massacres of the Yazidis, Armenians, and other minority groups by the Ottomans and Kurdish tribal leaders. Under such hostile circumstances, many of the Yazidis emigrated to [Georgia and Armenia](#) in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many Yazidis still remaining in Turkey fearing further discrimination emigrated to Germany while many in Germany joined the diaspora efforts that include communication linkups

with their brethren in Iraq and the Caucasus. Persistent persecutions have not only caused a wide diaspora of the Yazidis their worldwide population has also dwindled remarkably below one million. See Table 1 below.



The Yazidis' Position in the Middle East

Iraq has the largest Yazidi population ranging anywhere between 300,000 and 700,000. It is extremely hard to calculate the exact population of the Yazidis due to the lack of consistent censuses in Iraq, and the ISIS targeting them for ethnic cleansing, displacing thousands and making it even harder to track the population. We assume that roughly [90%](#) of Yazidis live under

the federal government of Iraq and about 10% under the Kurds in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).^[6]

However, in Iraq, the Yazidis struggled for a political identity for a long, and in 1975 the Ba'athist regime labeled their ethnic identity to Arab offspring to alienate them from the Kurds and the majority Shia Muslim population.^[7] In the 80s Saddam Hussein forced the Yazidis to relocate from their ancestral home near the Sinjar Mountains to makeshift villages in the underdeveloped areas of Iraq and speak Arabic. Along with this, 126 Yazidi villages were collectivized into 10 villages. This forced many Yazidis to abandon their ancestral home and move into these underdeveloped camps. The villages and land that the Yazidis were displaced from then went to the Arab settlers to Arabize the region. Thousands of Yazidi properties were redistributed to the Arabs and Sunnis. Traditional Yazidi practices like [animal husbandry](#) were blocked by the Iraqi government, and many of the villages they were forced into had very limited space for livestock. This greatly decreased both the health and economic opportunities of an already otherized minority group. This was done to split them territorially from the Kurds who were vying for autonomy at that time. Iraqi [schools](#) were forbidden from teaching minority cultures or religions including the Yazidis. The Anfal Campaign in the 80s, although not meant to target the Yazidis, further weakened the Yazidis in Iraq. Many [Yazidis](#) were detained, expelled, and disappeared as part of this Arabization campaign by the Ba'athist party.^[8]

The Yazidis' position grew increasingly better with the establishment of the KRG, but they are still subjected to widespread repression. Since 2003, there have been religious hostilities that have taken the form of violent attacks on the community. In [2012](#), a Yazidi couple was brutally murdered by a still-unidentified gunman.^[9] Muslim militants actively try to intimidate and harass Yazidi businesses and religious communities because they are considered devil worshipers. In 2010, a Yazidi business establishment was attacked by the Islamic militants for selling alcohol. The Yazidi also face oppression from the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq. In 2013, gunmen in jeeps attacked [12](#) alcohol stores killing nine people and wounding at least two more, and in a separate incident of bombing two people were killed and 15 were injured.^[10] Although no group claimed credit for the attacks, some believe that Shiite militias were responsible. Many of these Shiite militias are backed by [Tehran](#).^[11] This attack led to the deaths of ten laborers in this business and minimal punishment for the perpetrators. Yazidi villages and shrines were repeatedly targeted by fundamentalist attacks. In [2007](#), a coordinated attack on the villages of

Kataniya and Jazira by four truck [bombs](#) left almost [500 dead and over a thousand wounded](#).^[12] This was the biggest explosion in Iraq since 2003. The Yazidi were believed to be one of the primary targets of this attack. Many of the displaced Yazidis have had their movement [limited](#)^[13] and they refer to these camps as prisons because of the severe limitations on movement and the political pressure felt by Kurdish security forces.

Since 2014, the Yazidis in Iraq have been under constant threat. ISIS carried out a systematic cleansing of the Yazidi community in Sinjar, Iraq. In 2014, it threatened the Yazidi communities in Sinjar village and many surrounding villages with ethnic cleansing, abduction, and other crimes against humanity. Tens of thousands of Yazidis fled their villages and took shelter in the mountains of the Sinjar region. In Sinjar alone, an estimated [10,000](#) Yazidis were killed or kidnapped by ISIS.^[14] ISIS views the Yazidis as not only heathens but also as pagans who need cleansing. Those who escaped to the mountain were besieged by ISIS and denied access to water and shade in the harsh Iraqi summer, and many Yazidi children died from dehydration and exposure to the sun. Nearly all [88](#) villages in the Sinjar region were emptied by the ISIS of those who could not escape to the KRG or the mountains. In Kocho village, the nearly [1,200 strong](#) Yazidi population was wiped out. Men were separated from the women and then executed and buried in unmarked mass graves. Nearly eleven mass graves were found in [Kocho](#) alone. Thousands of young Yazidi girls between the ages of 13 and 16 were taken by ISIS and forced into marriages. The Yazidi women that were taken and forced into marriages are bearing the impact of the abductions and rapes, and they are being isolated if they are lucky enough to return to their communities because of the Yazidi religious laws surrounding marriage outside the community. There are many stories of Yazidi women being impregnated by ISIS fighters and choosing between exile from their community and their children. Young boys were taken by ISIS and forced into their training camps where they were indoctrinated and given [Muslim](#) names. Women that were too old to bear children were executed in Kocho. ISIS also bulldozed or burned down entire villages, and cultural and historical sites with the intent to wipe out the Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, and other minority cultures. What the Yazidi experienced in 2014 was nothing short of genocide. According to Article II of the Geneva Convention, there are two elements to genocide: mental and physical. The Yazidis experienced both aspects of genocide when the IS targeted them in 2014. ISIS certainly had the "[intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group](#)," (Yazidis in this case) and certainly is [responsible](#) for all five forms of physical violence (killings, serious bodily/mental harm, physical destruction, prevent births, and forcibly moving children).^[15] ISIS wanted to wipe out the Yazidis in Sinjar. In response, many Yazidis joined the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to protect their people

even though there remained a huge risk in joining the PMF because the Asyaish responded to the Yazidis joining the PMF by kicking out families of those who joined.^[16]

Fast-forwarding to the present day, the Yazidis continue to face a variety of armed threats in Iraq, especially in the Sinjar region. Turkey, ISIS, and other armed militias continue to operate and present a security threat to the Yazidis both in Sinjar and in IDP camps. As of February 2022, nearly [80](#) Yazidis have been killed by Turkish air and artillery strikes.^[17] The Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), formed to combat ISIS, have been a frequent target by Turkey because of its supposed ties with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The YBS is a part of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units meant to combat ISIS, but Turkey continues to target them. There is also a growing concern that Iran-backed Shia militias will destabilize the balance that exists in Iraq. They have claimed that one of its goals is to drive the U.S. forces by undermining security in the Kurdish region of Iraq. In 2021, Iran-backed militias claimed credit for a deadly rocket attack in [Erbil](#).^[18] The second reason can be linked to the KRG's relations with the west. Iran views the KRG as the "new Israel" and because of that, it must be resisted. Lastly, the Iranian forces hope to worsen relations between the federal Iraqi government and the KRG. All these goals, together, have the chance to destabilize the region which in turn can create a space for ISIS to resurge.

In Syria, the Yazidis have a longstanding history of being repressed by the faction in power. From Assad to ISIS, the Yazidis have suffered persecution, violence, and displacement because of their religious differences. They have had to deal with Basar-al Assad's Syria, the Islamic State, the KRG, the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG), meaning People's Protection Units, and Turkey, all of whom have very different positions concerning the Yazidis. Before the Syrian Civil War, there were roughly [80,000](#) Yazidis were living in Syria with almost all of them residing in Afrin.^[19] The Yazidis have lived in Syria since the 12th century in the areas in and around Afrin. The number of Yazidi villages has greatly decreased since the 1900s, from 85 to around 30. However, many of the remaining villages were spared from the ethnic cleansing that their co-religionists went through in Iraq because they were geographically scattered and were under the protection of the YPG. That said, before the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the Yazidis were effectively erased from civic life under Ba'athist rule. The Kurdish language, which many Yazidis speak, was banned in Syria under the Assad family's rule. Non-Muslim holidays, religious practices, and identification were banned under the Ba'athist regime. The Kurds and Yazidis both faced discrimination for being non-Arabs, but the Yazidis were also a religious minority which made their oppression intersectional. They were

not allowed to identify with either their ethnic or religious identity, unlike the majority of Sunni Kurds. The laws of Syria under Assad were built around Sharia law, and the Yazidis were forced to comply with these laws in all aspects of life including [marriage](#) even though they are not Muslims. Syria under the Assad family has attempted to remove the Yazidi identity from government records and social life. As of [2021](#), the Yazidis continue to have their religious identity repressed. The Syrian Justice Ministry ruled that the Yazidis were a sect of Islam and therefore subject to Islamic personal status laws.^[20] Unlike other religious minorities, they must go through Islamic courts rather than having their religious-personal status courts.

Under the Kurdish administration of northeast Syria, the Yazidis have had their position moderately improved since 2012. The YPG controlled many of the regions that ancestral Yazidi villages were in, and because of this was spared much of the violence that their co-religionists experienced in the Sinjar mountains. However, the YPG and the AANES did more than just protect the Yazidis. Unlike Assad's regime, they recognized the Yazidi religion as its own faith, independent from Islam. The Yazidis also occupied high positions in the AANES administration including the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The Yazidis in the AANES have for the [first time](#) in decades experienced a state that was responsive to their needs and tolerant of their faith. The YPG and the AANES are not perfect, but the material and social conditions they have created for the Yazidis are significantly better than that of those under Assad. The AANES has done a good job of ensuring the security of the Yazidis, but there are concerns that ISIS is resurging, which may undo this weak balance that currently exists in Syria.

However, the sanctuary that the Yazidis have found in northeast Syria is now under threat because of Turkish military operations in northern Syria. The Turkish military has effectively stymied the growth of religious freedom in northern Syria because it has threatened the stability of the region. The Syrian National Army (SNA), the Turkish-backed militia in Syria, has captured the city of Afrin which has a large Yazidi population. The [entire Afrin](#) canton is now under Turkish control, but the amount of actual control the Turkish government has on these groups is limited. Since the SNA has occupied Afrin, 90% of the Yazidi population has been driven out of the canton, some fled and others were forced out of their homes. Yazidi religious sites, burial grounds, and other cultural sites were destroyed by Turkish forces in Afrin. Nearly 50 Yazidis have been kidnapped since Turkey occupied Afrin, a number far larger than under the YPG. Turkey's militia forces have begun targeting the Yazidi for [removal](#) in territories controlled by Turkey in Syria.^[21] Turkish airstrikes targeted the Sinjar mountains where thousands of

Yazidi refugees live. Turkey has also targeted Yazidi [militias](#) for alleged connections to the PKK which has only worsened the security of the Yazidis who are not in displacement camps.^[22]

For the Yazidis who have not been able to return, they live in IDP camps that are under-resourced, under-secured, and relatively ignored by international and local actors. In early June 2021, a fire broke out at the Cham Mishko refugee camp where nearly 15,000 Yazidis have lived for seven years. There are many instances like this because the tents are effectively tent cities and this makes them vulnerable to the elements and fires. In 2014, a camp near Baghdad also burned down displacing 1,400 Yazidis who were under shelter there. In the Iraqi elections in [October 2021](#), a major question facing the candidates was how to deal with internally displaced people and the continuing consequences of ISIS.^[23] There are countless examples of IDP camps catching fire and burning down which has only worsened overcrowding in other camps. These campfires combined with the closing of IDP camps have left the residents in limbo. They can return to a different displacement camp or attempt to return home, but this is not an option for many displaced Yazidis. There is an ongoing security threat from ISIS and Turkey that makes returning to their ancestral homes near impossible. Settlers have moved into the disputed territory and have taken over homesteads.

In Turkey, the Yazidis occupy a precarious position. They are considered Kurds by the dominant Justice and Development Party (officially abbreviated as AKP or the AK Parti) but face discrimination from Sunni Kurds because of their religious differences. This makes them dually discriminated against both in terms of ethnicity and faith. Yazidi refugees in Turkey have been denied aid by the Turkish government and they face much of the discrimination experienced by the Kurds in Turkey including those in employment, violence, and lack of economic security. Because they are both an ethnic and religious minority the discrimination is often far more acute. Turkey has also occupied Afrin in Syria, the prime city for the Yazidis of Syria. In Turkish occupied Syria and Iraq, there are mass lootings, forced displacements, extortions, murders, kidnappings, and sexual violence conducted by Turkish forces. In Afrin, hundreds of civilians have been killed by Turkish airstrikes. However, what represents the biggest threat to the Yazidis in Afrin is the composition of Turkey's militias. The Turkish-backed militias in Syria have a large number of former ISIS fighters fighting in their ranks. Turkish airstrikes targeting YPG forces have allowed ISIS prisoners to escape including an airstrike near Jirkin that allowed some ISIS fighters to flee. According to the Pentagon, ISIS will benefit from Turkey's invasion of Iraq and Syria by having time to [reorganize](#), rearm, and reconstitute itself.^[24] There is also evidence that ISIS and Turkey have a much deeper [strategic](#) relationship. Many of ISIS's foreign fighters

came through Turkey. It's pertinent to mention that in Turkey, ISIS fighters have found refuge following its defeat in 2016. Turkish citizens have also helped recruit for ISIS, arranged bus recruits to the border, and allowed its people to visit their family members in ISIS. There is also some evidence that Turkey helped ISIS generate oil revenues by supporting its extensive, illegal oil trafficking networks. Ultimately, Turkey has become in many ways the logistical [hub](#) for ISIS. In Afrin, there were 228 cases of kidnappings with the majority of victims being Kurdish and Yazidi women. These kidnappings, similar to the style followed by ISIS, have been committed by the Turkish-backed forces creating a new threat for the already threatened Yazidi communities in Syria and Iraq. Turkish airstrikes have slowed the home return for many of the [Yazidis](#) of Sinjar.^[25]

Recommendations for Rebuilding the Yazidis

Following the genocide of 2014 at the hands of ISIS, the Yazidis need true commitments from the coalition that fought against ISIS, and not just empty promises of support. They have [three](#) core needs –security, justice, and reparations. As of now, the insecurity that the Yazidis face is multipolar. While armed threats from various armed groups continue to loom without any break, acute economic and social insecurity are being felt intensely. Many of the issues the Yazidis face are exacerbated by the volatility of the region. The insecurity the Yazidis face undermines growth in other areas that they are lacking such as education, economic opportunities, and community building. There are three thousand Yazidis who are recorded to be missing for several years since the collapse of ISIS territorial caliph. Many of the Yazidis that are missing were taken captive by ISIS, and many are being held for ransom now in Syria. Many Yazidis are not in a position to pay the heavy ransoms to get their family members back, and that has left many like [Abbas Hussein's](#) teenage son to remain under bondage at the hands of the captors for over five years.^[26] Mr. Hussein's son is being held by a former ISIS fighter who is now in Syria fighting with the Syrian National Army (SNA).

The missing Yazidis paint the larger threat the Yazidi community is subjected to in going back to their ancestral villages and towns, a telling reality that the specter of ISIS is far from over. ISIS continues to be a persisting threat to Yazidi communities in Syria and Iraq. In January 2022, ISIS launched one of its most coordinated and lethal attacks to date on the Al-Sina prison. This attack

had the similarity with the activities it followed a couple of years back wherein actions were launched through the widely spread sleeper cells as a tactical measure to make good the territorial loss in 2019. As of 2019, there were roughly [18,000](#) fighters still in Iraq and Syria who have access to a war chest of an estimated USD 400 million. From a national security standpoint, ISIS represents a meaningful armed threat to the AANES and the KRG even without territory.

Following the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the former leader of Da'esh, ISIS began operating through a decentralized command structure that allowed for greater autonomy amongst disparate sleeper cells. In 2019, 37 people were killed in an ISIS bus bombing. This attack was one of the largest in recent years conducted by ISIS, and it did not require territory or a centralized command structure for the attack to take place. The instability along the Iraqi-Syrian border has created a porous passage for ISIS fighters to move between the two countries. In December 2021, the village of [Khidir Jija](#) was attacked by ISIS resulting in the death of three civilians and wounding of several Peshmerga fighters. This attack was launched in conjunction with another assault on the Markmour district which killed ten Peshmerga fighters and three civilians.

The largest ISIS attack in recent times was the Al-Sina prison assault in January 2022. Hundreds of ISIS fighters swarmed the Al-Sina prison in an attempt to free the ISIS fighters imprisoned there. The attack was preceded by several car bombings along the northern walls of the prison. The fight over Al-Sina prison lasted over a week in what was one of the largest engagements with ISIS since they lost its territory. Roughly, 374 ISIS fighters, 50 Peshmerga fighters, and 7 civilians were killed in the fighting. The YPG was able to retake the prison with assistance from U.S. airstrikes. There is a growing concern that ISIS is becoming more organized in launching its attacks. The potential for an ISIS resurgence presents the largest armed threat to the Yazidi communities. When ISIS rose to prominence in 2014, the Yazidis were targeted for ethnic cleansing and now that ISIS may be resurging, there is a growing concern that they will be targeted once again for genocide. The Al-Sina prison represents two worrying trends: ISIS still has the organizational capacity to conduct attacks and coalition forces like the SDF are under strain and it is not the only armed threat the Yazidis face. They also are living at the crossroad in which four regional powers, Turkey, Iran, Syria, and the two Kurdish autonomous regions, are competing.

The Yazidis must interact daily with various armed groups from Iraqi government forces to Iranian-backed militias to the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, and this continues to undermine the security of Yazidis in Iraq and Syria. While they have been affected by the

military campaigns against the PKK in northern Iraq, airstrikes by the Turkish military have struck their villages and IDP camps forcing many to flee the mountainous areas of Iraq. In Sinjar, various armed groups vie for supremacy, and this has made it extremely hard for the Yazidis to return or rebuild. In Sinjar, the PMF sent three brigades in response to the Turkish threat. However, the PMF represents a unique threat to the Yazidis because the Iraqi government has limited control over them which in turn paved the way for them to violate human rights.^[27] The PMF has consistently [disobeyed](#) orders from the Iraqi army including its failure to follow COVID-19 restrictions and attacking Iraqi security and police forces.^[28]

Secondly, there is a deep distrust between the Yazidis and their Arab neighbors following the genocide of 2014 because the Yazidis feel that their Arab neighbors betrayed them when ISIS rampaged through Sinjar and other parts of Iraq. Local Arab, Kurdish, and Yazidi NGOs need serious international assistance to rebuild the lost trust between these communities and localized small-scale projects offer the chance for rebuilding social capital between these communities. As of now, the Yazidis are lacking social capital (Putman's Social Capital) because of a lack of effort from outside communities including the international community to repair the snapped connectedness. It remains a fact that unless the Yazidis are allowed to gain social capital, they may never end up in a position to make meaningful demands for rights and reparations. Similarly, the Kurds are weakened for not rebuilding the trust with the Yazidi communities in the Kurdish region. The Yazidis have been relegated to what Tocqueville would describe as a little faction that only turns inwards for reliable support.

Unless this is changed, any approach to fix the security for Yazidi-populated regions, any approach for reparations, and any attempt to find justice will fall short. This is since the Yazidis, Arabs, and Kurdish populations are not working in conjunction, but rather working separately in their bubbles to achieve their needs. All these three populations were affected by the ISIS insurgency, and all three must recognize that they are better off working together to rebuild. This will be a lengthy process that will require the goodwill of international communities and their Kurdish and Arab partners. Rebuilding social capital will be a difficult task because of the role the segments of the population of Iraq played in assisting ISIS. It's thus apparent that encouraging multiethnic and multireligious interconnectedness may prove critical to the Yazidis returning to Sinjar and other ancestral homes. A major aspect of rebuilding trust between the various religious and ethnic groups may be by helping the Yazidis give their lost loved ones the proper burial rights. There are approximately [80 mass graves](#) in Sinjar that are being exhumed so that those who died may receive a proper burial.^[29] Many Yazidis refuse to leave the camps

because they still have their loved ones missing, and it's hard to attempt to bring back normalcy without any perceptible return of the factor of family intactness.

The Iraqi government and the KRG should focus on returning the kidnapped, missing, and displaced Yazidis to their families so that they can truly begin the process of rebuilding. Rebuilding social capital is very doable, as substantiated by a survey by Mercy Corps that found that displaced people regardless of ethnic or religious identity are more likely to accept returnees of those who had similar experiences. Sunni Muslims and Yazidis who were displaced together have a higher likelihood of having inter-communal trust. The 2017 independence referendum in the KRG has caused a divide in the Yazidi community. Many Yazidis nurture distrust toward all Muslims regardless of sect or ethnicity following the ISIS carnage against them. The independence referendum has highlighted the existing [divide](#) between the Kurds and the Yazidis.^[30] Many Yazidis do not identify themselves as Kurds but rather as a separate ethnic group while many others are uncertain about the referendum because of the security implications that came from it. The other concern chasing many Yazidis is what their position would be if the referendum had actually been implemented especially because Sinjar, their ancestral home in Iraq, would have been split in half leaving them in a precarious position. The referendum would have brought either warfare to the Yazidis' homes or would have left them as a [disputed](#) and stateless people being competed over by Erbil and Baghdad. The Yazidis themselves were divided on the referendum – not a very conducive development for a community already divided following the onslaught by ISIS.

The genocide of the Yazidis, as mentioned above, has greatly degraded the unity that existed hitherto. The distrust of the KDP has led to a diverse field of twelve candidates running for four seats. The Yazidis at one point were a major voter base for the KDP, but not any longer. Two of the Yazidi candidates are backed by the PKK; two women are running for the positions, one backed by the KDP and the other by PMU. Many Yazidis want none of their protected seats to go to Kurdish parties because the Peshmerga left them in the lurch in [2014](#). Distrust toward the KDP remains because of its history of repressive policies against the Yazidis. There are concerns that the Yazidis in IDP camps will be coerced into voting for the KDP candidates out of fear for their safety. Another major cause for the divide in the Yazidi community is the cultural policy around marriages. A child is not a part of the community if born to parents that are not Yazidis, and there are thousands of children that have been born out of rapes, an atrocity committed by ISIS with alarming regularity. Some Yazidis believe that the children and their mothers should be brought back into the mainstream while others have sided with the Yazidi [Spiritual](#) Council's decision not to accept children of women raped by ISIS.^[31] Many women remaining in camps

fear returning because they worry their children will not be accepted by the Yazidi community. The United States government should focus its aid on repatriating families and putting pressure on Yazidi sheiks to accept children born out of rape to return with their mothers.

Thirdly, there is a distinct lack of economic opportunities for the Yazidis. Their ancestral home of Sinjar still lies in pieces nearly [five](#) years on from the fall of ISIS. The Iraqi and Kurdish authorities stated that Sinjar was safe to move back to in the summer of 2020. The families that returned have come back to their destroyed homes and mass graves. Many of those returnees must live in tents around the flattened ruins of their homes. The local economy is devastated to the point where those who are in Sinjar live off a few [pennies](#) a day. Those that returned are in the minority with nearly 200,000 still remaining in IDP camps. There is also a concern that in the process of fleeing ISIS, many documents were lost that outlined land and property rights. This creates another complication for the Yazidis returning to their homes.

Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution has made it more complicated when it comes to the sensitive issue of managing land tenure rights because of the Iraqi government's lack of will in implementing the law. Though intended to redistribute land that was illegally occupied, disputes over territories in the disputed zones of Iraq and a lack of political will has limited the effects of Article 140, especially for the Yazidis in [Sinjar](#). The distinct lack of economic opportunities is not limited to the IDPs, in general, Iraq is struggling with unemployment, budget shocks, and volatile oil revenues. Oil revenues have started to recover with the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, a decline in oil revenues had drastic effects because of Iraq's excessive reliance on oil. This has left both the KRG and the federal Iraqi government struggling with corruption and maintaining basic social services such as electricity, etc. The High unemployment rate in Iraq ([14.088%](#)) has made the lives of the Yazidis who are already displaced and in camps more miserable. The rehabilitation of the Yazidis in Sinjar is nearly impossible because nearly [80%](#) percent of the structures in the region are unusable. This means that even if the Yazidis return home, they will not have any form of normalcy there. The international community should focus on providing funding, resources, and protection via air cover for rebuilding the Sinjar region.

The international community must also take responsibility for the delivery of justice to the Yazidis. Local actors like the KRG, the Iraqi federal government, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), and Syria are attempting to process cases, but there are thousands of fighters waiting for their trial, along with tens of thousands of

noncombatants languishing in prison, not to mention ISIS fighters that are still active in both Iraq and Syria. These local players are now left with the responsibility of handling these cases; and with minimal aid from major countries like the United States, the process of justice delivery to the Yazidis has been abysmally slow. Unlike previous cases of ethnic cleansing, the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice have taken no real action to help the Yazidis get justice.

It's worth recalling that in the aftermath of the Bosnian genocide, a special international tribunal was established to process and charge war criminals; but no international tribunal has been established to process and charge ISIS fighters. In the 8-year aftermath of the Yazidi genocide, there have only been a handful of ISIS fighters who were charged with crimes outside of Syria and Iraq. This is a stark failure by the international community to properly assist the Yazidis in the fallout of the ethnic cleansing of 2014. Local actors are doing their best to establish justice for the Yazidis, but they lack the resources to properly handle every case. For example, France [refused](#) to take back their nationals who had joined ISIS while simultaneously trying to dictate how they are punished.^[32] The French government is worried that they will not be able to properly sift between those who actually committed war crimes and those who were just accused of being a part of ISIS. Many European nations simply [refused](#) to repatriate ISIS fighters.^[33] This has forced coalition forces and local actors to begin trying European nationals for the crimes they committed while fighting for ISIS. The international community has made calls for Iraq to bring justice to the Yazidis, but ISIS continues to be an active, persistent threat that undermines the judicial process. The Iraqi government and the KRG are doing well by following the UN recommendations. They passed the [Yazidi Survivors Law](#) and the Yazidi [Women] Survivors Law which focus on creating meaningful resources for survivors to overcome material and psychological damages.^[34]

However, there is no global effort to help find the missing Yazidis even though there are still nearly 3,000 such cases. The United Nations should establish a program that focuses on family reunification for the Yazidis. The Iraqi government, Syrian government, AANES, and the KRG need assistance in finding Yazidis that may be in IDP camps or are still with ISIS holdouts. A global initiative is needed to ensure justice for the Yazidi community which is still shattered by the ISIS carnage. Many Yazidi families are in limbo because leaving the IDP camps means giving up on their missing family members. For ensuring that the Yazidis are located, their missing brethren returned, and the community is rebuilt, there is an urgent need for a massive and concerted international effort. There is a lot of criticism about how the ISIS prisoners are

held by the International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs). But these INGOs fail to mention that the KRG, AANES, and the Iraqi government have taken the burden of both their locals who joined ISIS and citizens of foreign countries who came to Iraq/Syria and joined ISIS. As mentioned above, countries like France took more than five years to say they would repatriate their citizens who joined ISIS and many European counterparts stayed in line with this.

Kurdish leaders in the KRG must take responsibility for creating opportunities for the Yazidis. There is an acute lack of access to resources in IDP camps, especially in ones servicing the Yazidis in the Kurdish region. Many of the IDP camps are set up in isolated locations because it allows the KRG to use them as leverage against the federal Iraqi Government and to sustain the status of ‘dependable’ it enjoys, according to Houman Oliaei, a qualitative researcher at Brandeis University and an expert on Yazidi affairs. Furthermore, the KRG heavily limits the movement of IDPs for ‘security reasons,’ but according to the [Human Rights Watch](#), there is no real necessity that would require this regulation.^[35] For example, Yazidi women lack access to psychological and mental health resources to help recover from the trauma of displacement, kidnapping, and rape. There are high suicide rates in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, with several clustered cases of [suicide](#) in certain camps becoming commonplace. But the lack of resources makes it nearly impossible to evaluate the mental health of the Yazidi population.^[36] Mental health resources must be better managed by the KRG and Iraq. It is now 8 years since the aftermath of the Yazidi genocide and many of the Yazidi ancestral villages still lay in ruins. The combination of the pandemic and a struggling economy has created a situation in which both Iraq and KRG are unable to properly focus state resources on restoring damaged hamlets, villages, and towns that ISIS targeted for destruction.

COVID-19 has ravaged the Yazidi population because they were in consolidated and underserviced camps. A few mental health services that were provided in the IDP camps were shut down at the onset of the pandemic. Iraq has been particularly vulnerable to the pandemic because of a lack of resources, and the IDP camps received even less aid because the KRG and the federal Iraqi Government had to allocate resources to thwart the dreaded virus. Given the fact that Iraq’s medical capacity is limited, for those who have returned to Sinjar, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing restrictions on movement have further worsened the already weak local economy of [Sinjar](#).^[37] In Sinjar, the Yazidis can no longer go to the hospital in Dohuk and instead must take a four-hour ambulance ride to Mosul if they want to receive intensive care. Moreover, those remaining in camps are in an extremely dangerous position because the camps continually get merged leading to overcrowding which in turn creates the perfect environment

for the pandemic to spread. At these crowded camps, COVID-19 tests are hard to conduct and many cases go unreported. The international community must step up its efforts to distribute the COVID vaccine to Iraq and build trust among the Iraqi people about the efficacy of the vaccine.

As of February 2022, roughly 17% of Iraqis have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. This is not because of a lack of supply of vaccines, but because of a general distrust in the government and the vaccine itself. That being said, it was not until very recently that Iraq had a large stockpile of vaccines that could vaccinate its entire population. The United States should take the lead role in promoting and supplying the vaccine to the global south because two of its manufacturers hold the patents. The IDP camps that are already underserved must become the focus of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Iraq now that it has the vaccine stockpile and the vaccination rate has declined. These camps are overcrowded, lack medical facilities, and are under-resourced which makes them a great venue for the virus to spread. While the international community must make commitments to the global south to help these nations to get the COVID-19 vaccine in general, for the Yazidis, the vaccine is critical for a return to normalcy. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the severe restriction of movement of IDPs in Iraq, and without improving the vaccination rate amongst Iraqis and IDPs these movement restrictions may stay in place for a much longer time than initially expected. If this becomes the case, it will be a further setback to the Yazidis in rebuilding their ancestral homes in Sinjar because they simply cannot return or there is nothing to return to. The Washington Kurdish Institute recommends the United Nations Task Force on COVID-19 vaccines focuses their vaccination efforts on displaced peoples. These people are the most vulnerable to the pandemic and are more likely to become super-spreaders as there is no effective way to isolate them in refugee/IDP camps.

What is important for the western world is that they must truly focus on the plight of the Yazidis. There is a dangerous habit nurtured by the Western media which is to glance over issues in the Middle East. The coverage of the current Ukraine crisis gives evidence of that. A writer at the *Daily Wire*, Michael Knowles's tweet underlines the issue of western coverage of issues in the Middle East. His tweet: "It just occurred to me that this is the first major war between civilized nations in my lifetime" represents the greater western media's understanding of the Middle East as lacking civility and that their issues are less important because they are uncivilized. Or to quote a CBS reporter "this isn't Iraq or Afghanistan... This is a relatively civilized, relatively European city," when speaking about the war in Ukraine. This narrative around the Middle East as justified bloody interventions by western nations helps to explain why the Yazidis continue to be marginalized and forgotten. This logic in the west is pervasive and undermines many of their operations in the Middle East. Western policymakers must look critically at the rhetorical

differences in describing the war in Ukraine versus wars in the Middle East and understand how these rhetorical differences are often translated to policy differences. The Yazidis continue to struggle because the west has ignored them and there is a serious divide between how the west evaluates struggles in Europe versus the Middle East. Much of the work being done to rebuild Yazidi communities and the Yazidi culture is being done by local NGOs with marginal support from INGOs and western governments.

The Yazidis are losing faith in both regional and international actors, and for genuine reason. It has been nearly eight years since ISIS began its onslaught against them, and there has been very minimal material restitution of their position. Villages and towns in Sinjar still lay in ruins, hundreds of thousands of Yazidis remain displaced, and thousands more are still missing. Instead of working together to establish peace in Sinjar, the international and regional actors have effectively turned it into a warzone. The Yazidis still cannot return to their homes because of the continued threat of ISIS, but also because the state actors like Turkey continue accentuating its influence in the region. When American experts evaluate the Turkish-United States relationship, its primary focus is on preventing a realignment between Turkey and Russia. The United States, when working for its interests, has historically used sanctions and other means to steer Turkish politics in its favor. It should reevaluate its policy with Turkey based on its experience in fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Turkey was a poor [ally](#) in the fight against ISIS, and in many ways actually supplemented ISIS rather than combating it. And unlike Turkey, the YBS was a critical ally in the fight against ISIS because they operated in remote regions that coalitions at the start of the war struggled to reach. The United States should make it clear in its Turkish policy that continued incursions with civilian casualties in Syria and Iraq will be reciprocated with punishments. Specifically, targeting the Sinjar mountains and IDP camps will be met with a response. Until western actors take a meaningful stance on Turkish aggression toward its neighbors, the Yazidis will continue to exist in limbo. Unfortunately, the Yazidis are probably correct to not trust the west when it comes to Turkey. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created a complex geopolitical situation in which the United States must be careful in balancing its relationship with Turkey. Turkey has, in recent history, purchased arms from Russia creating security concerns for NATO members, and a growing fear amongst US security policy experts that if pushed too hard, Turkey will realign with Russia. The lack of trust makes sense when one looks at the history of U.S. interventions in the Middle East. The Kurds, which can include the Yazidis and often do, have been betrayed by the United States no less than eight times in recent history.

The Yazidi Genocide and Previous Genocides

There are several basic traits to identify a genocide. The primary one is centered around the idea that by eliminating a targeted group, society is made better. However, unlike previous genocides, ISIS was targeting the areas in which the Yazidis lived with the primary intention of occupying themselves. The Yazidi genocide, the Rwandan genocide, the Holocaust, and the Armenian genocide all followed this idea that [society was better](#) off without the targeted group.^[38] This is because in some way the underlining idea is that by wiping out a specific group, the nation can restore its former glory, or at least this has been the propaganda used effectively to fuel ethnic cleansings.

At least some part of the campaign against the Yazidis was rooted in ISIS's goal of establishing a caliphate. Much like previous genocides, the primary target for mass killings is the men and boys of a given ethnic group. This has been the case in Rwanda, Armenia, and Myanmar, and it is also the case with the ISIS genocide of the Yazidis. The manner in which ISIS conducted its genocide of the Yazidis was systematic. When ISIS occupied a Yazidi village, the process was formulaic; they would separate the men and boys from the women, girls, and young children. The women would be subject to forced marriages, sterilization, rape, and other crimes while the men and boys would either be executed or sent to ISIS training camps. The men and boys are generally targeted because they are viewed as those who will fill leadership and community roles and the second reason is to display dominance over the targeted community. A Yazidi woman claims that she was told by an ISIS [fighter](#): "you have no husband. I am your husband now."

In Yazidi culture, one is only a Yazidi if both of their parents are Yazidis, and because of family separation and the killings there runs a risk that an entire generation may be stunted in terms of population numbers. This is not just because of the sheer number of Yazidi men killed but also because the children of IS fighters and Yazidi women are considered Muslims and not Yazidis by the community. This has forced the Yazidi [women](#) to choose between their children, often born as a result of rape, and returning home.^[39] Unlike the Rwandan or Armenian genocide, the targeted group has strict religious/cultural laws surrounding its identity that complicate the process of identification of the surviving Yazidis. Another core component of genocides is the focused sexual violence that the targeted group experiences when being attacked. In Iraq, ISIS took Yazidi women as sex slaves, a tactic that is reminiscent of the Ottoman empire's ethnic cleansing of the Armenians or that of the Rwandan genocide and the Tutsi women.

It is important that international human rights groups recognize sexual violence and the psychological harms emanating from this crime as explicit parts of genocide. Sexual violence is more than just depravity in the case of genocide, it has the intent to undo the social fabric of the targeted ethnic/religious group. The means that the ways sexual violence can upend social capital are multifaceted, ranging from victimized women being ostracized to young women struggling with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), coupled with the social impact of a mass mental health crisis. These are just a few examples of how sexual violence changes the social structure of an ethnic group. For example, it was an unprecedented, surprising decision by Yazidi religious leaders to welcome back women who were enslaved and sexually violated by ISIS. The fact that it was unprecedented for the Yazidi religious leaders to do this shows how mass sexual violence has the potential to completely tear apart communities.

As discussed above, even now the Yazidi women with children of ISIS fighters are struggling with the aftermath of the mass sexual violence they underwent. The aftermath continues to create tensions within the community. While there are obvious impacts from mass killings, the impact of sexual violence, unlike mass killings is pervasive and a major hindrance for normalcy to return. This is especially true for the Yazidi culture because it is male-dominated, and gender-based violence had been instrumental in [isolating](#) Yazidi women from their communities. ^[40]

The Yazidis, like other communities that experienced genocide and ethnic cleansing, are dealing with both material and physiological impacts. The aftermath of the Yazidi genocide and the effects on the Yazidi shares some commonalities with other genocide survivors. Nearly [43%](#) of the Yazidi survivors suffer from PTSD with nearly 80% of their women suffering from PTSD-like symptoms. ^[41] This high prevalence of PTSD is similar to that of the survivors of the Bosnian genocide of the 1990s, with nearly [35%](#) of Bosnians suffering from this ailment. ^[42]

Much like in the aftermath of the Yazidi genocide, it is a massive issue when it comes to stability and economic opportunities. Nearly 40% of Bosnians were out of work with 67% of youth struggling to find employment. Much like the survivors of the Bosnian genocide, the major concern of the Yazidis has shifted from armed security threats to economic insecurity looming over them. The combination of displacement and pandemic restrictions has made the rebuilding efforts of Sinjar logistically difficult, and since the Yazidis lack access to basic healthcare, many of them are extremely vulnerable to COVID-19. The Yazidi genocide, like other instances of ethnic cleansing, has caused massive psychological harm to the survivors.

A major factor that sets apart the Yazidi genocide from other mass killings is the actor who conducted the killings. In Bosnia, Armenia, and Myanmar the ethnic cleansings were part of the respective state policy and were backed by the state military forces, whereas the Yazidis were targeted by a non-governmental armed group. Government forces usually carry out much more

organized and sanctioned violence, but unorganized groups like ISIS represent a unique threat to the victimized communities. The state-sponsored perpetrators of crimes come in uniforms whereas an ISIS fighter could be the neighbor of a Yazidi. It is this camouflage pattern of assault that has fueled a greater distrust between the Yazidis and their Arab neighbors that in turn is crippling the rebuilding processes. That is why it's of paramount importance to rebuild social capital in such cases because, without it, these communities will continue to harbor distrust and work against their own and each other's interests. The Rwandan genocide is unique and incomparable because militias conducted the majority of killings and unlike the Yazidi genocide, the Hutu militias were backed by the state – a marked dissimilarity from the ISIS-engineered genocide where the direct challenge came from the state actors. Similar to the Rwanda episode, the Rohingya genocide was backed by the Myanmar military. The ISIS genocide is one of the few genocides in modern times that did not have the weight of the state behind it. This has created a discrete lack of trust between communities in the Middle East which has only grown gradually because of the difficulty to identify who was actually a part of ISIS as the majority of its fighters were average citizens before joining militancy.

Conclusion

The Yazidis are a strong and resilient people, but without aid from the international community, they may become one of many displaced people who have not been able to return home. There are concrete actions that the international community can take – from establishing tribunals to compelling the international ISIS members to establish a program to assist in finding the missing Yazidis. It needs no elaboration that these are all actions that are doable and manageable. Local actors like the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Iraq must stop using the Yazidis as a political tool in negotiations over budget allocations, land appropriations, and the disputed territories. This is because the Yazidis do not trust either of the institutions due to obvious reasons. The KRG should not create any obstacle for the Yazidis returning to Sinjar by limiting travel but instead should facilitate their safe return and the rebuilding process of Sinjar. Of course, this will require the assistance of the federal Iraqi government because Sinjar lies in the disputed territories. Nevertheless, a joint operation by the KRG and Iraq is feasible as we have seen in the fight with ISIS, and may serve not only to improve the Yazidis' position but also to increase the trust between Kurdish and Iraqi security forces. Material promises made to the Yazidis must be kept, or else the distrust will only amplify. International actors like the United States and Russia must assist the Yazidi people. Russia should recognize the genocide of the Yazidi people as a bare minimum. But ultimately, the Yazidis, especially the Yazidis of Sinjar, need support from local, regional, and international actors to return home and truly begin the process of regular life.

Table 1: Yazidi Demographics

Yazidi Demographics	Pre-2014 Population	Date of Census	Recent Population
Iraq	<u>500,000-700,000</u>		<u>≈300,000</u>
Germany	<u>200,000</u>	2019	
Armenia	<u>35,727</u>	2010	
Russia	<u>40,586</u>	2011	
Belgium	<u>35,000</u>	2018	
Georgia	<u>12,000</u>	2014	
United States	<u>10,000</u>	2017	
France	<u>10,000</u>	2018	
Syria	<u>80,000</u>	2011	<u>10,000</u>
Sweden	<u>6,000</u>	2018	
Turkey	<u>5,000</u>	2010	<u>5,000-30,000</u>
Australia	<u>3,000</u>	2019	
Canada	<u>1,200</u>	2018	

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