



Middle East  
Centre



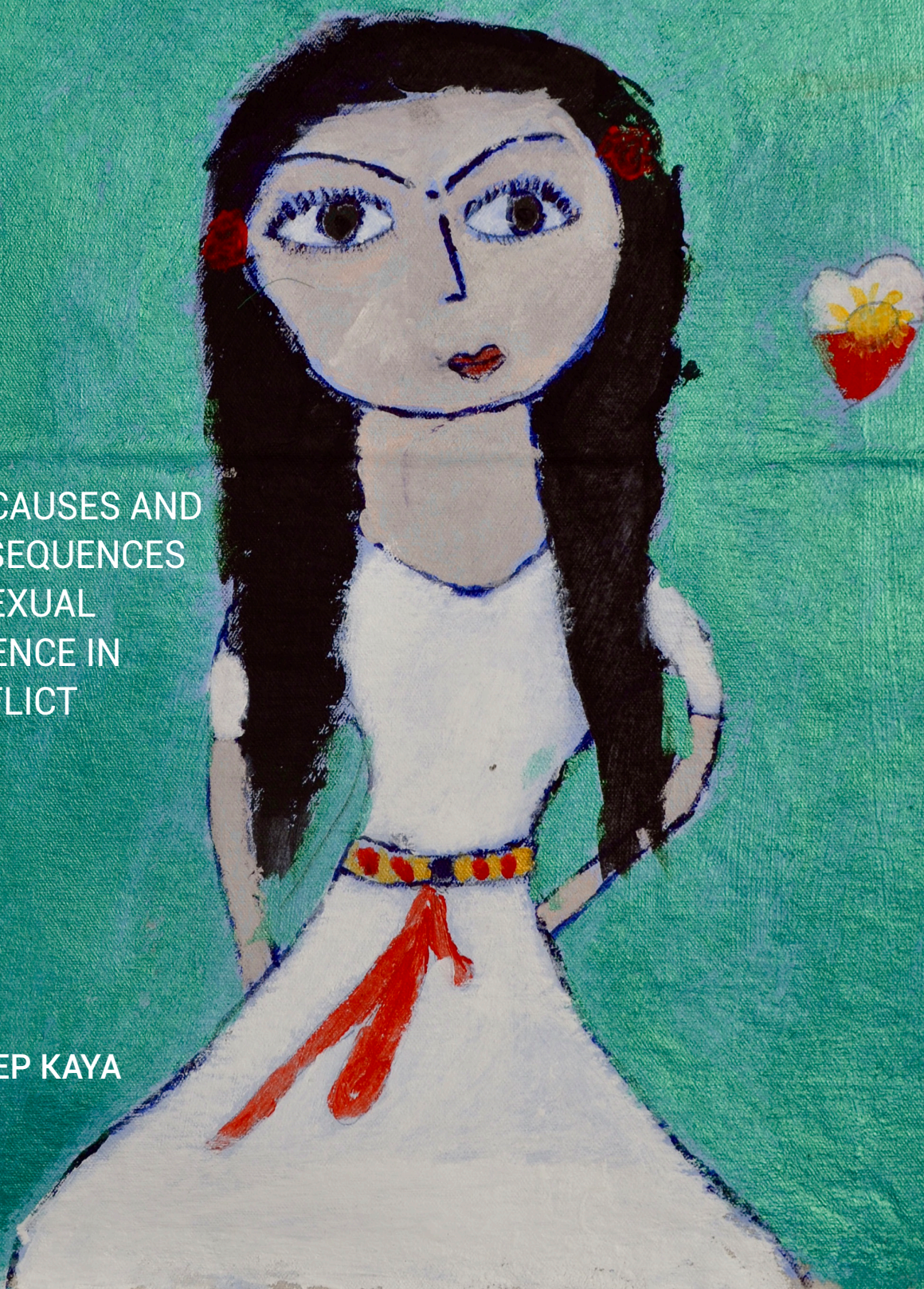
CONFLICT  
RESEARCH  
PROGRAMME

Research at LSE

# IRAQ'S YAZIDIS AND ISIS

THE CAUSES AND  
CONSEQUENCES  
OF SEXUAL  
VIOLENCE IN  
CONFLICT

ZEYNEP KAYA





## About the Middle East Centre

The Middle East Centre builds on LSE's long engagement with the Middle East and provides a central hub for the wide range of research on the region carried out at LSE.

The Middle East Centre aims to enhance understanding and develop rigorous research on the societies, economies, politics and international relations of the region. The Centre promotes both specialised knowledge and public understanding of this crucial area and has outstanding strengths in interdisciplinary research and in regional expertise. As one of the world's leading social science institutions, LSE comprises departments covering all branches of the social sciences. The Middle East Centre harnesses this expertise to promote innovative research and training on the region.

# Iraq's Yazidis and ISIS: The Causes and Consequences of Sexual Violence in Conflict

Zeynep Kaya

## About the Author

**Zeynep Kaya** is a Senior Teaching Fellow at the Department of Development Studies, SOAS, and a Visiting Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre. She is currently working on the drivers and dynamics of conflict in Iraq, and on women's political participation in Kuwait.

## Abstract

Preventing sexual violence in conflict is not possible without tackling the underlying structural factors that foster this form of violence. Militant radical groups such as ISIS use specific gender norms in connection to perceived religious/sectarian identities in order to morally justify and organise violence. ISIS reinforced gender norms that perpetuate patriarchy and men's control over women to organise the lives and behaviours of its recruits and the people under its control. ISIS's attacks on the Yazidis showed again that gender (and gendered violence) is a key component of the politics of violence and cannot be reduced simply to an outcome of conflict.

## About the Conflict Research Programme



The Conflict Research Programme (CRP) is a three-year programme designed to address the drivers and dynamics of violent conflict in the Middle East and Africa, and to inform the measures being used to tackle armed conflict and its impacts. The programme focuses on Iraq, Syria, DRC, Somalia and South Sudan, as well as the wider Horn of Africa/Red Sea and Middle East regions.

The Middle East Centre is leading the research on drivers of conflict in Iraq and the wider Middle East. Our partners in Iraq are the Institute of Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, and Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, Baghdad.

*For more information about the Centre's work on the CRP, please contact Sandra Sfeir ([s.sfeir@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.sfeir@lse.ac.uk)).*



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

## Recommendations

The case of the Yazidis and their suffering usually gains attention in the context of the struggle against the Islamic State (ISIS). A new approach geared towards addressing the concerns of the Yazidi community, beyond the paradigm of combating terrorism, needs to be developed. This is necessary for preventing the reoccurrence of such atrocities in the future. This strategy should include the following:

### **Suggestions to national and international actors**

- Establish an international protection mechanism and rebuild the conflict-affected areas in Sinjar in collaboration with Iraqi and Kurdish authorities, and support existing efforts towards criminal and social justice for Yazidis. These are urgent steps toward ensuring the survival of the Yazidi community in Iraq and enabling them to envision a future in the country.
- Support the international and national work being carried out to help violence-affected and displaced Yazidi communities in Duhok. The governorate's health, education and humanitarian services have limited capacity and need support. In relation to this, arrange safe transport for Yazidi girls and women to enable their sustained access to physical and psychological treatment in Duhok.
- Amplify the voices of Yazidi women by including them in talks, negotiations, reconciliation processes and peacebuilding and protection mechanisms.
- Tackle legal discrimination against women. For instance, the laws which allow only fathers to pass religious and national identity to children – and prioritise fathers' custody – exacerbate the problems affecting the children of Yazidi women and their ISIS captors.
- ISIS' atrocities have encouraged changing gender norms and perceptions about girls' education within the Yazidi community. Build on these changes by supporting female empowerment initiatives by the community, civil society organisations and Kurdish government authorities.

### **Suggestions to all actors to reconsider prevalent thinking**

- Treat sexual violence in conflict as part of a continuum of violence against women (from domestic violence to legal discrimination to rape during war), not as a stand-alone issue.
- Avoid simplistic explanations of religion and culture in relation to women's position in Iraqi society and adopt a holistic approach to tackling sexual violence. Consider the intersection of gender with other factors such as socio-economic status, minority position or geographical and urban/rural location.
- It is the responsibility of all actors to end violence and discrimination against women. Placing this burden primarily on women's organisations removes responsibility from the actors who perpetuate patriarchy and discrimination.
- Do not see international or Western actors as the devisors of frameworks of gender

equality. Women's rights activism in Iraq is not a foreign import and has a long history; nor is feminism a Western idea. International and national actors should be aware of this and the multiple manifestations of feminism in different contexts.

## Introduction

It has been five years since ISIS brought the Yazidi community in Iraq to the brink of destruction. In the summer of 2014, ISIS murdered thousands of Yazidis and took large numbers of women and children hostage. At least 10,000 of the half million Yazidis in Iraq were killed or kidnapped.<sup>1</sup> According to the head of the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Yazidi Women Rescue Office, 6,417 Yazidis had been kidnapped and, by July 2019, 4,509 of them had been rescued.<sup>2</sup> Some women and children held by ISIS have been re-captured by criminal gangs to be trafficked or sold back to their families. Those that managed to escape the brutal attacks have ended up in displacement camps scattered around the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), with a small number relocating to Western countries as refugees. The majority of Yazidis who remain in Iraq – over 300,000 – are still living in camps or thatched houses and tents across Duhok Governorate with no hope of returning, as both their homes and trust in their Arab neighbours have been destroyed.<sup>3</sup> There is also ongoing resentment towards Kurdish government security forces who failed to protect the area, which enabled ISIS's easy takeover of Sinjar. Due to their dwindling numbers and dispersion across Iraq and all around the world, Yazidis fear the end of their existence as a coherent, living community in their ancestral homelands in Iraq.

This report shows that preventing sexual violence in conflict is not possible without tackling the underlying structural factors that foster this form of violence. Militant radical groups such as ISIS use specific gender norms in connection to perceived religious/sectarian identities in order to morally justify and organise violence. ISIS reinforced gender norms that perpetuate patriarchy and men's control over women to organise the lives and behaviours of its recruits and the people under its control. ISIS's attacks on the Yazidis showed again that gender (and gendered violence) is a key component of the politics of violence and cannot be reduced simply to an outcome of conflict. Therefore, gender is key not only to the prevention of conflict but also to how this is addressed in post-conflict periods.

The first part of the report explains the structural gender inequalities and minority–majority relations in Iraq that facilitated the attack against the Yazidis. The second part looks at the impact of these attacks and how the Yazidi community responded to the tragedy. It traces the community's response and transformation in areas related to gender and religious norms. It also examines how Yazidis see their position and future in Iraq.

---

<sup>1</sup> Valeria Cetorelli, et al., 'Mortality and Kidnapping Estimates for the Yazidi Population in the Area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq', *PLoS Medicine* vol. 14, no. 5 (2017), pp. 1–15.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammed Rwanduzy, 'Number of Yezidi mass graves excavated now at 17', *Rudaw*, 2 July 2019. Available at <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/02082019> (accessed 9 November 2019).

<sup>3</sup> The Yazidi community inhabited the Sinjar and Bashika districts in Nineveh Governorate under central government authority and the Sheikhan district in Duhok Governorate under KRG authority.

Fieldwork was conducted during three separate trips in 2017 and 2018 to Erbil, Duhok and Baghdad.<sup>4</sup> In total, 41 interviews and two focus group discussions were held with Yazidis and 18 interviews were conducted with local and international experts. Yazidi interviewees were displaced and non-displaced individuals, sexual violence survivors (female), non-community leaders, religious authorities, activists and NGO workers. Interviewees were chosen from a variety of backgrounds (gender, age, location, habitation in camp or outside camp, urban or rural background, socio-economic background and position in community) in order to provide a holistic perspective on the impact of genocide. Yazidi interviewees included members of all layers in the community, including the Yazidi leader Prince Tahseen (*mir*), Yazidi spiritual leader Baba Sheikh (*sheikh*), a number of *pirs* and several members of the *murids*.<sup>5</sup>

The non-Yazidi informants included health and legal authorities and civil society organisations (both international and local) that carry out work to support the Yazidis and fight violence against women. The aim of speaking to this group was to capture wider debates and perspectives on the Yazidi experience. The research also relied on primary sources such as declarations by Yazidi leaders and material on ISIS's doctrine on gender and Yazidis. This material helps situate the information gathered from the interviews on gender and community relations. The thematic data analysis of interviews focused on gender norms and Yazidis' positioning of themselves within Iraq and internationally.

## Structural Causes of Sexual Violence in Conflict

Examining the gendered nature of contemporary conflicts reveals important insights into the dynamics and drivers of violence. In the analyses of conflicts, women are typically treated as faceless victims of war, contributing to their invisibility and leading to lumping of populations together as 'womenandchildren'.<sup>6</sup> Sexual violence in conflict does not stand alone and extreme incidents of cruelty are integral to other methods of warfare as a deliberate and systematic rule, as seen in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Part of this fieldwork was conducted with the support of the Global Religion Research Initiative at the University of Notre Dame. I would like to thank Güneş Murat Tezcür, Bayar Mustafa, Tutku Ayhan and Jeen Malta for all their support for the research for this paper and in conducting the fieldwork. I would also like to thank all the interviewees for their immense contributions to the research and to Yasmine Kherfi for her help with transcriptions.

<sup>5</sup> The Yazidi community is formed of different caste-like layers: *murids* (common people), *pirs* (members – usually elder – of a particular tribe with mentoring and leadership roles in the community), *sheikhs* (spiritual and religious class) and, on top of it all, the *mirs* (upper class or aristocracy). Marriage is not allowed between members of different layers.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Thompson, 'Women, Gender, and Conflict: Making Connections', *Development in Practice* vol. 16, no. 3-4 (2006), pp. 342–53, p. 348; Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Nicola Henry, 'The Fixation on Wartime Rape: Feminist Critique and International Criminal Law', *Social and Legal Studies* vol. 23, no: 1 (2014), pp. 93–111.



Wider normative political, economic and social structures play a larger role than assumed in leading to violence against women in conflict. This is part of a spectrum of gender-based violence caused by normalised and systemic discriminative and unequal structures shaping women's everyday lives and sanctioning male aggression.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, gender-based and sexual violence in conflict happens more in countries with higher levels of institutionalised gender discrimination.<sup>9</sup> Justifications for the use of violence and experiences of violence are typically intersectional, meaning multiple identity-related or structural factors intersect to make certain groups more vulnerable. Specific ethnic or religious constructions of identity intersect with gender, leading to the targeting of civilians whose gender or sexual status intersects with a minority status.<sup>10</sup>

## The Precarious Position of the Yazidi Minority in Iraq

Yazidis are estimated to number around half a million, spread through northern Iraq, northern Syria, western Iran, Turkey, Armenia and Germany. They are the second largest religious minority in Iraq, after Christians. Most Yazidis speak Kurmanji Kurdish, and many also speak Arabic. The Yazidi identity and religion are closely connected to the land. Many Yazidi shrines are scattered around Sinjar and Bashika districts in Nineveh and Sheikhan in Duhok, with their most important sacred temple, Lalish, located in Sheikhan.

The Yazidi community has remained on the 'periphery of periphery' of the societies among which they have lived, both socially and geographically, throughout history.<sup>11</sup> Yazidis' distinct identity is a mixture of religious and ethnocultural characteristics and genealogy. Yazidi beliefs and traditions are among the oldest surviving religions today. Internally, the community is imbued with tribal divisions, caste-like structures, the rural-urban divide, and geographical and political division. Marrying non-Yazidis is not allowed, as Yazidi identity passes from parents to children, with both parents required to be Yazidi.

Yazidis were under significant threat before ISIS's attacks because meaningful and effective government mechanisms to protect minorities from targeted violence were already lacking.<sup>12</sup> Minority communities in Iraq have experienced specific challenges since the 2003 military intervention, including during the 2006-8 sectarian conflict and the attacks by ISIS and other extremist groups between 2014 and 2017. In these periods of violence, Christians and other minority communities were viciously targeted as individuals and in

---

<sup>8</sup> Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman, *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 3-5.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Davies and Jacqui True, 'Reframing Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Bringing Gender Analysis Back In', *Security Dialogue* vol. 46, no. 6 (2015), pp. 495-512, p. 501.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 505; Catharine MacKinnon, 'Rape, Genocide, and Women's Human Rights', *Harvard Women's Law Journal*, vol. 17, no. 5 (1994), pp. 5-16.

<sup>11</sup> Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999). Available at [http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/IRQ/INT\\_CEDAW\\_NGO\\_IRQ\\_16460\\_E.pdf](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/IRQ/INT_CEDAW_NGO_IRQ_16460_E.pdf) (accessed 9 November 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, 'Iraq: The Situation of Ethnic and Religious Minorities' (Brussels: 2013).

larger groups. In addition to becoming displaced, their lands and properties were confiscated and vandalised. The Iraqi political system and its party structures do not facilitate the representation of minorities' concerns and interests, which exposes them to systemic discrimination in law and practice. This discrimination is exacerbated by the lawlessness and insecurity that accompanies sectarian and extremist violence.<sup>13</sup>

Historically, Yazidis were outsiders in the Ottoman *millet* system<sup>14</sup> and large-scale military campaigns were carried out against the community. After the establishment of the Iraqi state, Yazidis remained on the periphery of society, mostly in rural border zones. With the establishment by the US and UK of a no-fly-zone after the 1991 Gulf War, the areas Yazidis lived in Iraq were divided. Sinjar remained under Iraqi authority, but Sheikhan was divided between Iraq's Nineveh province and the Duhok area under Kurdish control. This arrangement continues today. The government of Iraq (GoI) and the KRG both claim control of Yazidi-populated areas in Nineveh.

Like many other minority communities in Iraq,<sup>15</sup> the Yazidis' presence in these disputed territories has put them in a precarious position. The GoI and KRG's inability to agree on the territories' status and continued competition over their control has led to their neglect – both in terms of infrastructure, education systems and economic situation, and in terms of security and protection. Minorities in these territories lack political advocates and representation, and therefore have been particularly overlooked.<sup>16</sup> This position pushed the Yazidis to ally with one of the governments and their political parties, which did not help to advance their cause.<sup>17</sup>

There is a long-term historical mistrust between the central government in Baghdad and the Yazidis, who have also had a sometimes fractious relationship with the Kurds. Yazidi–Kurdish relations are complicated; having lived under Kurdish control since 1992, Yazidis in Duhok have become more integrated within the Kurdish region and sections of Yazidis have joined in the aspirations for Kurdish self-determination. However, the lack of preventive action and protection by the Kurdish Peshmerga forces for Yazidis in the Sinjar area during the ISIS attacks remains a sore point. On the other hand, the Duhok Governorate in the KRI has accepted and provided shelter for Sinjari Yazidis who escaped ISIS.

<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Maisel, 'Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination: Yazidis in the New Iraq', *The Middle East Institute Policy Brief* vol. 18 (2008): pp. 1–9.

<sup>14</sup> The Ottoman *millet* system administratively separated religious communities and acknowledged each community's authority in overseeing its own communal affairs, primarily through independent religious court systems and schools.

<sup>15</sup> In northern Iraq these include Assyrians, Chaldeans and Turkmens living in disputed territories and in and around Baghdad there are Baha'i, Mandaean Sabean, Jewish and other Christian communities.

<sup>16</sup> Dave van Zoonen and Khogir Wirya, 'The Yazidis: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict', Report by Middle East Research Institute, 2017, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> In Iraqi Kurdistan, minorities have allocated seats in the parliament, eleven out of 111 are reserved for Christians, Armenians and Turkmen, but none for Yazidis. In Baghdad, Yazidis get one seat in the Parliament through being considered as part of the Kurdish entity, not as a distinct minority. *Ibid.* p. 12.

## Gender Norms and Inequalities as Facilitators of Sexual Violence

Violence committed against Yazidi women and girls by ISIS is related to wider structural gender-based discrimination and other inequalities. The Yazidis' position as a religious minority community, combined with ISIS's religious and ideological norms, created further specific vulnerabilities for them as a non-Muslim community. ISIS's gender norms and the wider gendered inequalities in Iraq are inextricably linked to the group's deployment of sexual violence against Yazidi women and girls.

ISIS justified its aggressive strategies towards the Yazidi community (killing, hostage taking and forced conscription) through its interpretation of certain Islamic rules and practices. According to *Dabiq*, the group's official publication, ISIS members, as 'true believers', sit at the top of the societal hierarchy, followed by other Muslims who are yet to become true believers. Then come Christians and Jews. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the *mushriks* (non-believers), which includes the Yazidis as 'a pagan minority' whose existence Muslims should question 'as they will be asked about it on Judgment Day'.<sup>18</sup>

Yazidi women's precarious position as members of a *mushrik* community was exacerbated by their gender. A woman could be forced to serve as a domestic servant, sexually abused and enslaved, commodified and sold. Sexual violence against Yazidi women created a sense of victory and cohesion among ISIS members. A piece in *Dabiq* written by a woman called Sumayyah al-Mihajirah defended slavery as a practice encouraged by 'true' Islam. She rejoiced in the entry of the first slave girl into her house and in the humiliation of the non-believers: 'we thanked our Lord for having let us live to the day we saw *kufur* [rejection of Islam] humiliated and its banner destroyed.'<sup>19</sup>

These religious justifications do not, however, sufficiently explain the gendered violence implemented by ISIS. ISIS's own gender norms and gendered hierarchies provide further pretext for its treatment of the Yazidis. At the top of its female hierarchy are the wives and mothers of ISIS fighters and at the bottom are the women of *kufur*. ISIS's women are expected to live under their husbands' authority. According to the group's English publication, *Rumiyah*, a wife's main responsibility is to be a 'shepherd in her husband's home', defined as 'a tremendous task and an enormous trust that has been placed on the Muslim woman'.<sup>20</sup> A manifesto for women living under the Caliphate, written by the all-female Al-Khansaa Brigade in 2015, states that 'her creator ruled that there was no responsibility greater for her than that of being a wife to her husband'.<sup>21</sup>

Although the statuses of Muslim and Yazidi women are clearly different in ISIS's hierarchy, there is a continuity between the two. The difference is that Muslim women who adhere to ISIS's ideology have more agency and see their position as an elevation. Yazidi women

<sup>18</sup> ISIS, 'The Failed Crusade', *Dabiq*, Issue 4, 11 October 2014, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> ISIS, 'They Plot and Allah Plots', *Dabiq*, Issue 9, 21 May 2015, Issue 9, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> ISIS, 'The Ruling of the Belligerent Christians', *Rumiyah*, Issue 9, 4 May 2017, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.



and girls, who are seen at the lowest level of ISIS's 'female' hierarchy, have no control over any decision and their wellbeing is fully dependent on the person who claims ownership of them. The degree of Muslim women's and Yazidi women's subjugation under ISIS are also different. However, in the end, both Muslim and Yazidi women are seen as subjects to male authority.

## Gender Inequality in Iraq

The gendered socio-economic structure ISIS tried to create did not exist in isolation from other social structures and gender norms in Iraq.<sup>22</sup> It was simply an extreme form of pre-existing patriarchal practices, which are in one form or another prevalent across the world.<sup>23</sup> Rampant gender inequalities, discrimination and violence against women in Iraq illustrate that there is a continuum of violence between everyday forms of violence and discrimination and ISIS's gender norms. The fact that sexual violence in conflict is more common in societies with higher levels of gender-based discrimination shows this continuity.<sup>24</sup>

This is not to say that all types of gendered violence are the same; but the difference is in their form, not their essence. This is also not to say that gender inequality is experienced in the same way across Iraq. It varies historically, geographically, from community to community, based on ethno-religious background, between urban and rural areas, and based on socio-economic background.

In Iraq women experience a high degree of domestic and other forms of gender-based violence, discrimination in legal, political, institutional and socio-economic terms, and unequal access to education and employment. This is despite Iraq having a strong and resilient women's rights movement, led by women constantly facing setbacks and lacking political support. The Iraqi Personal Status Law and Penal Code also contain discriminatory clauses negatively affecting women's rights.

The current constitution, adopted in 2005 following the US invasion, further damaged women's legal position by allowing each province to draft its own family laws. This meant legislation could be based upon the majority's religion.<sup>25</sup> Increased conservatism, employment scarcity and insecurity due to violent sectarianism forced women to give up their jobs, confining them to the private sphere and making them more vulnerable to all forms of physical and psychological violence, trafficking, abduction and rape. Today, non-discriminatory legal rules and policies are not fully implemented and programmes and action plans for women's rights are not funded. There is also a backlash against women's rights

<sup>22</sup> Gender norms and inequalities in Syria are also relevant here as ISIS expanded into Syria and several Yazidi captives were taken to Syrian cities such as Raqqa.

<sup>23</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Davies and True, 'Reframing Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence'.

<sup>25</sup> Mishkat Al Moumin, 'Constitutional and Legal Rights of Iraqi Women', *The Middle East Institute Policy Brief*, no.1, October 2007.

activists' work from Islamist and radical groups. With the increase in sectarian violence in Iraq, sexual violence has become even more pervasive, affecting women from all religious and ethnic backgrounds. Killing, rape, harassment and the abduction of women have been used to humiliate rival communities and settle scores. Women and girls have also been abused for financial gain through human and sex trafficking.<sup>26</sup>

The Iraqi government has done little to combat trafficking of girls and women, to prosecute the criminals or to support the victims. The Iraqi judicial system tends to punish the victim rather than the offender, and the security services are unqualified to carry out operations against the perpetrators of violence against women in war and conflict.<sup>27</sup> The majority of women who are subjected to violence and assault do not report incidents due to family or societal pressure, and if they do, they are sometimes killed in the name of the 'honour' of the family. Women in detention in Iraq are routinely raped and tortured.<sup>28</sup>

In this wider context of violence against women and gender-based violence in Iraq since 2003, women from minority communities are even more vulnerable. The lack of legal and practical protections and ongoing insecurity combined with religious extremist ideologies has further exposed Yazidi women to violence.

## Consequences of Sexual Violence: The Yazidi Perspective

The Yazidi community's experience has left lasting scars, trauma and resentment. Yet, it has also led to unexpected outcomes for gender relations within the community.

### Gender Norms

#### Attitudes Towards Survivors of Sexual Violence

Female survivors who were held captive by ISIS and exposed to sexual and other forms of violence were initially hesitant about returning to their families and communities, fearing that they would be rejected, or that their male family members would kill them. One of the factors in this is that sexual contact with a non-Yazidi – non-consensual or otherwise – is grounds for leaving the faith.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, according to Yazidi tradition, if someone leaves the community and converts to another religion, they are no longer accepted back into the community or to Yazidism.

However, Baba Sheikh, the spiritual father of the Yazidis, with the support of Yazidi religious authorities, issued a declaration in September 2014 welcoming back to the

---

<sup>26</sup> UN Iraq, 'Women in Iraq Factsheet: Displaced Women and Women in Conflict', 2015. Available at <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Woman-Day-English-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Iraq: Security Forces Abusing Women in Detention', 6 February 2014. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/06/iraq-security-forces-abusing-women-detention> (accessed 11 November 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Conversation with Güley Bor, researcher and international lawyer specialising on the Yazidis.

community all Yazidi men and women who were held captive by ISIS and forced to convert to Islam. Yazidi women and girls were defined as ‘angels’ and ‘victims’ and were re-baptised in Lalish, paving the way for wider community acceptance. This was a huge change in Yazidi religious practices, which all Yazidis interviewed for this research welcomed. After the declaration, the number of survivors who returned to their community increased.

Readjustment and acceptance have not been easy for female survivors. Less is known about male survivors of sexual violence by ISIS but cases of sexual violence against Yazidi boys have also been reported.<sup>30</sup> Survivors and their families are still traumatised, and the stigma of being sexually assaulted continues. The families or the community do not always understand the trauma and the psychological impacts of sexual violence. Therefore, these girls are either expected to go back to their household responsibilities as before, or they live in relative seclusion, under pressure not to leave the house or to laugh, and to wear dark clothes. Suicide rates are high among survivors.<sup>31</sup>

The issue of children born to Yazidi women and ISIS captors is probably the most difficult to resolve for the community.<sup>32</sup> Laws criminalising abortion makes it hard for women to choose this option and leads them to seek unsafe abortion.<sup>33</sup> These children are usually not accepted by the community; several have been sent to orphanages in Baghdad and Mosul and there are efforts to relocate mothers and children abroad. This response reflects a desire to prioritise community cohesion, even if it comes at the expense of the choices and lives of the children and their mothers. The main reason is that for someone to be Yazidi, both parents have to be Yazidi. This is compounded by the National Identity Card Law 26/2 which states that the child shall follow the father’s religion.<sup>34</sup>

### Talking about Sexual Violence

Yazidis have been unexpectedly open about sharing their experiences of sexual violence and reacting to these atrocities. For instance, the survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Nadia Murad has been campaigning for ISIS perpetrators to be held accountable. Sexual violence is a difficult issue to make public and acknowledge in most societies. Despite this

<sup>30</sup> Ariel Ahram, ‘Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS’, *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 3 (2015), pp. 57–78. The account of the experiences of survivors reported in this paper rely on interviews conducted with female survivors.

<sup>31</sup> Interviews with local NGOs.

<sup>32</sup> According to three different NGO sources, the number of mothers with children from ISIS is around 200 as of May 2018. The actual figure may be higher owing to concealment. Some women give their children to the PKK and, after returning to areas under PKK control, take shelter with their child. Yazidi survivors with children sometimes find different strategies to navigate this situation. Some claim to their families that they met a husband (usually dead or missing) at some point and the child is his. Even though this is not true, and the family knows this, they accept it. Some mothers want to keep the child, some do not.

<sup>33</sup> Güley Bor, ‘Response to and Reparations for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Iraq: The Case of Shi’a Turkmen Survivors in Tel Afar’, *LSE Middle East Centre Report*, October 2019.

<sup>34</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2647 (April 2019) was the first time children born of rape were mentioned in the context of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.



taboo within the Yazidi community, male community leaders and members, including brothers, fathers and husbands of survivors, have also openly addressed the topic. The Yazidis interviewed for this research, including survivors, said the world needs to know what they went through.

According to one Yazidi community leader, an academic and ex-politician, openly talking about sexual violence was a significant step which triggered meaningful transformation in the community. He stated that, ‘Yazidi women were brave enough to break the taboo and talk about themselves and their experience. I think it’s the first time in history.’ A Yazidi woman in Duhok working at a women’s rights organisation said:

The community from Sinjar is a closed community [but] when [survivors] spoke about their experiences and saw that the community is with them, they began to ask about their rights. And even now, at conferences and workshops they always ask about their rights. This made a big difference.

An NGO worker providing psychological support to Yazidi survivors and their families added:

At the beginning, we faced many problems and challenges... [the community] refused our help because [...] for some, when you say you have a problem, that means you are mad or crazy, especially when if it’s psychological. But not anymore. They ask for help. They want to change. They are tired of being silent. They want to speak and find solutions to their problems.

### Education and Public Engagement

Another important change among displaced Sinjari Yazidis is their attitude towards education and their engagement with NGOs. Six of the displaced Yazidi women interviewed specifically said that if the people of Sinjar had been better educated, the genocide would not have happened. A Yazidi woman working for an international NGO stated that ‘the Shingali<sup>35</sup> women were initially reluctant but then started to participate in training and even started working’. She attributed this partly to the exposure of the conservative Sinjari Yazidi communities to the more open life of Yazidis in Duhok.

Female Yazidi community members indicated that with the return of survivors, some Yazidi men’s attitudes towards women’s position in society has started to change. For instance, men now feel they should give girls more agency and enrol them in education so that they are better prepared to protect themselves in the future. A Yazidi NGO worker living in Duhok said:

This made a difference for the community even when the Sinjari IDPs come here.<sup>36</sup> They meet the Yazidi community and learn from each other. This brought the communities together [...] When we opened the centre, it was very difficult for us to bring

---

<sup>35</sup> Shingal is the local name for Sinjar.

<sup>36</sup> The term ‘IDPs’ refers to Internally Displaced People.

in women, the camps being far. Some fathers, husbands or brothers didn't let them [women and girls], but now it is easy for us to go to the camps and inform them about our activities in the centre. They are coming directly without asking.

Interviewees attributed these changes in attitude to multiple factors. The most important reason was that ISIS's genocidal attacks made the community realise their vulnerability. A male Yazidi activist said:

Before it was the financial status of the family that would enable the girls to go to school. But after ISIS's attack, almost 90 to 95 percent of the families are sending their girls to school... It is as if ISIS created a way of telling the people that school is important for your children.

He added that families who send their daughters to school 'see education as very important. Yazidis have no power in the area or in general, so the way they see it, if you're educated, you're more powerful. Especially for girls and women.'

Some Yazidi respondents indicated that attitudinal change was relatively quick because of the inherent gender equality in the Yazidi religion and the flexibility of the faith. A Yazidi community leader argued that:

We have in our religion female holy persons, and we had a princess who was running the Yazidi community for 40 years – Mira Meyan Khatun. So the negative attitudes to women we previously practiced came from Abrahamic religions.

A Yazidi male activist said that, 'theologically, the Yazidi religion does not differentiate between men or women. But again, society prevails, and you're living in a society where men always have the upper hand.'

Yazidi activists also noted that wider improvements in women's rights in the KRI had positively affected Yazidi women living in Duhok. The Kurdish parliament passed laws that improved the status of women in the Personal Status Law and the Penal Code. A male Yazidi who is an academic at Duhok University said, 'in Duhok most Yazidi women are no more underdogs, they get their salaries, they go to universities, and they are free to choose their husbands.'

### **Yazidis' Perception of their Future in Iraq and International Engagement**

Another impact of the atrocities is the change in the Yazidi community's perception of their future position in Iraq and, linked to this, their engagement with the international community and foreign support. This emphasis on the international dimension manifested itself in different ways in the interviews.

All Yazidi interviewees who survived ISIS's attacks and sexual violence said they want to leave Iraq for Germany, Canada or Australia. Although, ideally, they want to go back to their homes in Sinjar, they think this is no longer possible. They cannot imagine going back to living with their Sunni Muslim neighbours because many of them aided ISIS, killed Yazidis and raped their daughters. However, there are also accounts of Arab Muslims helping

Yazidis escape, and some Yazidis indicated that their neighbours had to obey ISIS's orders or risk being killed. Nonetheless, they cannot imagine cohabitation with Sunni Arabs.

For Yazidi community leaders, reconciliation is close to impossible. The Yazidi Prince Tahseen, who recently passed away, explained:

If only a hundred fifty or so men were killed, we would've probably been able to reconcile and make up with each other again, to live with each other again, but after taking 3,000 to 4,000 women and girls, it's very difficult to go back to living together.

Yazidis do not share similar sentiments towards other Muslim communities in the region, such as the Kurdish or Shi'a Turkmen. However, there is a general frustration with the lack of protection by Kurdish and Iraqi forces during ISIS's attacks in 2014.<sup>37</sup>

Yazidis also think returning to Sinjar is not possible because of the lack of security and inability to guarantee that such attacks would not happen again. Moreover, there are few services such as schools, hospitals and other basic infrastructure. The director of a women's rights organisation in Duhok said there exists a 'big need for the international community to think about rebuilding the areas... for Yazidi people, if there is any opportunity to leave, they will go because it has been four years, nothing has changed.' She also noted there is an ongoing demographic change in the Sinjar area due to Arabs moving in.

A Yazidi community leader pointed to politics as a reason for the lack of support for returning home:

[The central government, Arabs and Kurds] see our presence here as non-permanent because they think we will leave; the majority of Yazidis are already living abroad anyway. For political actors, Yazidis are not important, they cannot tip the balance of politics in Iraq.

Moreover, Yazidis also do not believe they will receive justice in Iraq for the atrocities they experienced. There is no effort to bring justice or at least to provide protection for Yazidis if they go back to Sinjar. This lack of hope for change in their situation is a key driving force behind Yazidis leaving Iraq.

Another dimension that came to light during the interviews is the Yazidis' engagement with the UN and other international platforms on genocide and sexual violence in conflict to make their voices heard. Yazidi activists, both in the region and the diaspora, are striving to get ISIS's atrocities against Yazidis to be defined as genocide by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the US House of Representatives. Several experts have already defined the atrocities as genocide – acts of violence that intended to destroy in whole or in part the Yazidi community and were carried out through mass

---

<sup>37</sup> Shi'a Turkmen women and men were also forcefully deported by ISIS, executed and abducted, and were furthermore exposed to sexual violence, but this was not as systematic as it was towards Yazidis. Güley Bor, 'Response to and Reparations for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Iraq', October 2019.



executions, abductions, forced conversions and sexual violence.<sup>38</sup> The identification and documentation work, including examining mass graves, is ongoing. Nadia Murad's campaign to raise awareness is the most notable example. These activists are making Yazidi voices heard by utilising international legal and policy frameworks on genocide and sexual violence in conflict.

However, as Yazidis and NGO activists have noted, international responses have not been consistent or sustainable. There is a heavy focus on eliminating ISIS but Yazidis fear that ISIS – or a similar variant of the phenomenon – will return because the root causes of the problem have not been addressed in a sustained way. A (non-Yazidi) NGO director said:

The international community focuses on the short term without thinking of the long-term impact of their role [...] The root of the crisis remains even after ISIS, because ISIS did not end. I think the international community is responsive when there is a big issue like when ISIS came here, but they don't sustain the response.

### Underlying Reasons for Change

ISIS's attacks on the Yazidi community led to significant changes for the community in gender norms and relations with the outside world. As a result, the community is repositioning itself. It is transforming internally, as the changes in religious (including the ruling on re-acceptance to the faith in 2015) and gender norms show. Externally, Yazidis are trying to reconfigure their future to ensure their survival as a community and to gain international support.

The key underlying reason for this change is the fact that Yazidis feel extremely angry after experiencing yet another genocide. The Yazidi vernacular labels the persecution and violence they experienced at the hands of the local rulers and imperial authorities in history as *firman*.<sup>39</sup> All Yazidi community members interviewed defined ISIS's atrocities against their community as the latest *firman*.

An anecdote shared by a Yazidi interviewee describes the Yazidis' perception of their situation:

I think it was in 1936, my grandfather had a friend who was Jewish, and another friend who was Christian. All three were sitting in a café in Bashika. Of course, at the time, Jews were being kicked out of Iraq. Gradually, they lost their jobs, could not work in hospitals and schools, could not go to school. The Jewish friend said 'you know, today is Saturday. And ironically tomorrow is Sunday. And Wednesday is not that far'. He was implying [that] 'today is Saturday' means we're [to be] kicked out as Jews, 'tomorrow

<sup>38</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, "They came to destroy": ISIS crimes against the Yazidis', 2016, A/HRC/32/CRP.2; Fazil Moradi and Kjell Anderson, 'The Islamic State's Êzîdî genocide in Iraq: The Sinjar Operations' *Genocide Studies International* vol. 10, no. 2 (2016): pp. 121–38.

<sup>39</sup> The name given to decrees and military campaign orders by the Ottoman sultans. The campaigns of the Kurdish Ottoman Emirs Bedir Khan Beg and Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz in the nineteenth century are still widely remembered by the community members.

is Sunday' means the Christians will be out, and then finally, on Wednesday, as it is the Yazidi religious day, you'll be kicked out.

However, Yazidis believe that their situation is even worse because of the particularities of their religion. As a Yazidi community leader said,

To be Yazidi is difficult, it's not an easy religion. If a Muslim or Christian migrates, they can find a mosque or church anywhere. A Yazidi needs to celebrate religious festivals here on the land, he should go to Lalish. Yazidis should maintain the feeling of affiliation to the land. We are practicing rituals that have existed in this land since before Christ.

Therefore, although Yazidis do not see a future for themselves in Iraq, they are concerned about the future of their community due to its dispersion around the world and the loss of connection to the land and its holy temples.

## Conclusion

Violence committed against Yazidi women and girls by ISIS is not an anomaly simply related to the group's extremist nature. Rather, conflict-related sexual violence takes place against the backdrop of structural gender-based discrimination and other inequalities. The Yazidis' position as a religious minority community, combined with ISIS's religious and ideological norms that justified attacks on non-Muslims, created specific vulnerabilities. In this case, the perceived superiority of Muslim identity versus the perceived inferiority of Yazidi identity intersected with gender norms around women's position in society.

Yazidis connect the atrocities to long-term disadvantages of being a minority group living in disputed territories in Iraq and the pervasive prejudices towards their community and its religious identity. Within wider majority–minority relations in Iraq, gendered hierarchies and structural inequalities, ISIS's attacks against the Yazidis are only an extreme form of an already ongoing discrimination against minorities and women in general. The genocide and its outcomes cannot be understood separately from this wider context.

The Yazidi community's views on why they were targeted in this way and how their society has been affected by these atrocities reflect their awareness of the precariousness of their minority position intersecting with gender inequalities. Despite admitting the prevalence of patriarchal rules in their community (attributed by the Yazidis to living in a conservative society), after the attacks the Yazidi community changed religious norms about re-acceptance in the hope of containing negative attitudes within the Yazidi community and to help survivors re-integrate into the community. The onus is now on the GoI, the KRG and the international community to enable their recovery as a community, to build on these positive developments, and to tackle the factors that contributed to this in the first place.

## Conflict Research Programme–Iraq Report Series

**Al-Kaisy, Aida**, 'A Fragmented Landscape: Barriers to Independent Media in Iraq', *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (June 2019).

**Al-Khafaji, Hayder**, 'Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces: Possibilities for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration', *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (November 2019).

**Al-Mawlawi, Ali**, 'Public Payroll Expansion in Iraq: Causes and Consequences', *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (October 2019).

**Bor, Güley**, 'Response to and Reparations for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Iraq', *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (October 2019).

**Dodge, Toby, Zeynep Kaya, Kyra Luchtenberg, Sarah Mathieu-Comtois, Bahra Saleh, Christine van den Toorn, Andrea Turpin-King & Jessica Watkins**, 'Iraq Synthesis Paper: Understanding the Drivers of Conflict in Iraq', *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (October 2018).

**Mansour, Renad**, 'Iraq's 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction Between Reform and the Status Quo', *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (February 2019).

**Mansour, Renad, & Christine van den Toorn**, 'The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?', *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (July 2018).

**Skelton, Mac & Zmkan Ali Saleem**, 'Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries after ISIS: Heterogeneous Actors Vying for Influence', *LSE Middle East Centre Report* (February 2019).

**Watkins, Jessica**, 'Satellite Sectarianisation or Plain Old Partisanship? Inciting Violence in the Arab Mainstream Media', *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series 11* (April 2019).







**Publications Editor**

Ribale Sleiman Haidar

**Editorial Assistant**

Jack McGinn

**Cover Image**

Self-portrait painting by Wansa, a 13-year-old Yezidi girl. Painted during an art project organised by British artist Hannah Rose Thomas for survivors of IS captivity at the Jinda Centre in Dohuk August 2017.

© Hannah Rose Thomas

<http://hannahrosethomas.com/>

---

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) or the Middle East Centre. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) and the LSE Middle East Centre should be credited, with the date of the publication. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this paper, the author(s) and/or the LSE Middle East Centre will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this paper.

The London School of Economics and Political Science holds the dual status of an exempt charity under Section 2 of the Charities Act 1993 (as a constituent part of the University of London), and a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act 1985 (Registration no. 70527).



**Middle East Centre**  
London School of Economics  
Houghton Street  
London, WC2A 2AE

---

 [@LSEMiddleEast](#)

 [@lsemiddleeastcentre](#)

 [lse.middleeast](#)

 [lse.ac.uk/mec](#)