

## **THE YAZIDI AND THE ISLAMIC STATE, OR THE EFFECTS OF A MIDDLE EAST WITHOUT MINORITIES ON EUROPE**

### **Abstract**

Ex abrupto the little known and closed Yazidi community has become a symbol of the atrocities of the Islamic State against minorities and of the risk deriving from extremism. The strong impact of IS on the Yazidi and other communities in the Middle East – Christians and others - has also provoked a migration wave towards Europe. The A. has worked on field in Iraq and Iraqi-Kurdistan since 2012, and had researched on and with the Yazidi long before the IS, realizing studies and documentaries. She sustains that the roots of the crisis were apparent before the crisis and the physical-psychological effects on minorities are much deeper, as they mine the structure and the evolution of their communities. Yet, the inner resources of the Yazidi community and the new global scenario have created also opportunities. Migration of minorities is a crucial issue: although constant in the last decades, it is now seriously endangering the rich social composition of the region and the stability of the communities when they scatter in diasporas. Europe must help the Middle Eastern countries to protect their minorities as they are a fundamental element for the balance of power and for the social dynamics.

**Key Words:** Minorities, Yazidi, Islamic State, Migration, Kurdistan, Middle East

### **Discoveries**

The world discovers the existence of some minorities only when outrageous events in which they are prominent actors hit the headlines. It is the case of the Ossetians living in Caucasus, who were 'discovered' in 2008 because of the conflict in Georgia.<sup>2</sup>

It is also the case of the Yazidi<sup>3</sup>, who were 'discovered' in summer 2014 be-

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2 Del Re E. C., From the Balkans to Caucasus and back. Paradoxes of the so-called precedents in a post-Balkan perspective, in: *Mapping Conflict and Peace in Eurasia*, Mahapatra A. D. (ed.), Oxon-New York, Routledge, 2011, pp.36-53

3 I shall use in this text the conventional transliteration *Yazidi* – instead of others like *Ezidi* - indistinctively for singular and plural.

cause of the persecutions perpetrated against them in Iraq by the *Islamic State* (IS) - as it will be mentioned from now on in this text - also known as *Islamic State of Iraq and Levant* (ISIL), *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* (ISIS), or by the acronym *Daesh* in the Middle East.

The media gave great resonance in August 2014 to the events that took place in the mountainous area of Sinjar, in Iraqi-Kurdistan, where the Islamic State invaded villages, killed, raped, kidnapped, enslaved their defenseless inhabitants. The Peshmerga – Kurdish armed forces – although outnumbering the Islamic State fighters, withdrew. Two-hundred thousand people were obliged to flee. It was the beginning of a permanent nightmare for the Yazidi.

The violence against women, with systematic rape and other sexual abuses even on children, was particularly shocking for the world, evoking the tragic events that took place in the 1990's Balkans wars, especially in Bosnia, in particular the violence against women. Although the practice of enslaving the Yazidi in Iraq has ancient roots as it has occurred repeatedly in history, its implementation in our times is horrifying. Yazidi women and children sold as merchandise in market squares, has made us realize how easy it is to erase centuries of developments of human rights.

In Iraq today there are around 350.000 refugees and 1.500.000 IDPs (Internally Displaced People). From the start of January 2014 through June 2015, according to data diffused by the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), of the IOM, there are 3.087.372 internally displaced individuals (514.562 families), dispersed across 102 districts and 3.540 distinct locations in Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

Of the people displaced since January 2014 in Iraq, a disproportionate number are from ethnic and religious minorities, including Assyrians, Kaka'i, Shabak, Turkmen and Yazidi.<sup>5</sup>

A significant aspect of such humanitarian crisis is that it has affected many parts of society, and has been caused by different violent events between different parts of society. This shows that the phenomenon undergoes a continuous regeneration: when it ends between two groups in a given place, it starts again in another between other groups. The nature of the motivations can vary and the effectiveness of the narrative of the motivations can be explained according to various criteria.

As Puttick affirms:

"Despite the adoption of a new constitution in 2005, the holding of elections, and the agreement of autonomy for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the position of minorities [in Iraq] remained precarious. The administrative status of the regions in which many minorities lived remained in limbo, and minorities paid the price for power struggles between the federal government of Iraq and

4 IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)- Iraq, 2015, <http://iomiraq.net/dtm-page> (retrieved: September 2015)

5 Minorities of Iraq: see <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq/figures-analysis> (retrieved: September 2015)

the KRG. The Shia-dominated government led by Nouri Al-Maliki alienated many Sunnis, leading to large-scale protests and violent resistance. This discontent has propelled the rise of militant Sunni groups, especially the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which later shortened its name to the Islamic State. Fuelled by gains made in neighboring Syria, ISIS and allied groups have engaged in systematic campaigns of violence against Shia Muslims and religious minorities".<sup>6</sup>

The consequences of the situation described by Puttick are that Iraq seems to have developed on two tracks: one oriented towards conflict resolution, peaceful coexistence, democracy; the other perpetuating prejudices based on ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation, economic status and other. The two tracks seem to alternate, and create a permanent risk, hindering the future.

There are many reasons why the attacks of the Islamic State were effective: a) the nature of the violence; b) the lack of protection by the tribes controlling the areas and the enthusiasm of the emerging militias of the Islamic State in front of a Iraqi State Army that simply withdrew or remained inactive because of its unpreparedness; c) the fact that the villages were very small, marginalized over the years since Saddam's times (and before): an easy target for the new militias; d) the villages were caught in the middle of the ongoing power struggle between Bagdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, expression of the sectarian tensions in the country.

It is worth mentioning, though, that the flow of IDPs had been constant to other areas of Iraq and especially to Iraqi-Kurdistan for more than a decade, due to the security risks and all the consequent social problems (domestic violence; discriminations in accessing employment, housing, public services, political participation; decreased freedom of movement and worship and other). For instance, many members of minorities have fled during the years to Iraqi-Kurdistan to find a safer environment. In 2013 I visited the community of Christians in Ainkawa, the Christian neighborhood of Erbil, and Father Rayan Atto introduced me to Christian families who have moved from Mosul or Bagdad to Erbil to find a safer place for their children, preparing to migrate to Europe as soon as possible. Father Rayan Atto pronounced in those days prophetic words, affirming that the Christians in the Middle East are forgotten and are dying out because of migration.

The phenomenon of emigration in Iraq has been the plague of each minority community for centuries, caused by uncertainty, feeling unsafe, being discriminated. All minorities have suffered discrimination, including the Sabeen-Mandean community, to give an example. As the World Directory of Minority Rights states: "Sabeen Mandaeans face extinction as a people. As their small community is scattered throughout the world, Sabeen-Mandaeans' ancient language, culture and religion face the threat of extinction. In 2006, UNESCO listed the Sabeen-Mandaeen language in its *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Dis-*

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6 Puttick M., *Report: From Crisis to Catastrophe: the situation of minorities in Iraq*, Minority Rights Groups International, October 2014, <http://www.minorityrights.org/download.php?id=1469> (retrieved June 2015)

appearing. Since the outbreak of violence in 2003 in Iraq, most Sabean-Mandaeans have either fled the country or have been killed. Today, there are fewer than 5,000 remaining in Iraq".<sup>7</sup>

Going back to the Yazidi, the violence by the Islamic State is thought to have caused more than one-hundred thousand Yazidi to [flee](#) to other parts of northern Iraq or even to cross the border into Syria. One of the most serious consequences of this movement of people is that it has redesigned the social geography of the country, making people choose to live in places where their community constitutes the majority, creating minorities in their turn, with an endless domino effect. Minorities become majorities and vice versa. This makes the definition of 'minority' in the Middle East difficult.

Moshe Ma'oz and Gabriel Sheffer<sup>8</sup> have created a categorization aimed at simplifying the identification and definition of minorities in the Middle East :

a) Groups that are Arab but not Sunni Muslim: religious groups that are ethnically/linguistically Arab but not Sunni: Christians (Maronites, Protestants, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox) and Muslim sects: Shiites, Alawis, Druze, Ismaili, Ahmaddiya and other;

b) Muslim but not Arab: ethnic/national groups that are Sunni Muslim but not Arab: Kurds, Amazigh/Berbers, Turkomans, Circassians;

c) Groups that are neither Arab nor Muslim: Jews, Armenians, Assyrians, southern Sudanese tribes.

I recognize the utility of this categorization, but must stress out the fact that identity, according to my long experience on field, goes well beyond, and can be the cause itself of discrimination, intolerance or other, even within the same minority group (the differences between the Syrian Kurds and the Iraqi Kurds are significant at social, cultural, educational level due to, for instance, their different recent history, and their 'Kurdishness' is not a guarantee or a synonym of mutual understanding or tolerance).

The categorization by Moshe Ma'oz and Gabriel Sheffer is illuminating but biased by its being based on a reference point, the distance from that point defines the minority. It seems to emphasize the differences rather than the affinities. There is a common denominator that is transversal to what Ma'oz and Sheffer affirm, that is the identity of the members of the different minorities. In my experience with thousand of Syrian refugees in Iraq, I have observed that identity for them moves on different levels, on top of which there is their nationality intended as citizenship: "I am Syrian" first, followed by the declination of the other elements of identity. The 'hierarchy of individual identities' varies according to social contexts or situations. This need for identity as form of identification is enhanced in Iraq by the fact that as regards religion, in Identity Cards amongst the

7 Entry: "Sabian-Mandean", in: *World Directory of Minority Rights*, October 2014, <http://www.minorityrights.org/5746/iraq/sabian-mandaeans.html> (retrieved: September 2015)

8 Ma'oz M., Sheffer G. (eds.), *Middle Eastern Minorities and Diasporas*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2002.

personal characteristics, there is still the section 'religion' and, as Father Douglas, a Chaldean priest in Erbil told me, the only options available are 'Muslim' or 'Non-Muslim'.

In the documentary I filmed amongst the Christians in Iraq, a man who has emigrated to California twenty years ago, returning to his native country to attend the ceremony of the inauguration of a Christian church, clearly says: "First I have to say I am Iraqi. Second to say: I am Christian. But the identity of the country comes first. And we are Christian Catholic, we are Chaldean Catholic."<sup>9</sup>

According to Kimlika and Pfösti<sup>10</sup>, the most relevant issues regarding minorities in the Middle East are directly connected with the system of power sharing. They sustain that despite in many countries power sharing has reached a positive level (Lebanon, Kurdistan, Algeria, recent elections in Turkey), minorities still suffer from being considered as separate groups or "marked citizens". This might be due to a legacy of the *millet*, those religious communities that in the Ottoman Empire would enjoy certain rights. Was the *dhimma* (a contract of protection between non-Muslim and Muslim authorities, which did not guarantee the same social rights of the Muslims, but was extended to all minorities including the so called Zoroastrians) an example of perfect coexistence, or did it perpetuate a social class system based on the so called *dhimmitude*, subordination, submission of second class citizens? Kimlika and Pfoestl mention the impact of the colonial system in the Middle East, which identified the minorities to protect them, at the same time stressing out the differences and 'inventing' the minorities, with a dis-unifying effect and a positive discrimination in favor of the minorities. In the post-colonial era, the state-building process, such as that occurred in Iraq, was based on a defensive strategy aimed at protecting the majority. The idea of 'one nation-one state' ideology was pushed as far as generating monstrous policies such as the '*Amfal*' the arabization campaign of Saddam carried out even with chemical weapons against non-Arabs, as I shall mention below.

The recent events occurred in Iraq denounce a mistake in the process of state-building, which clearly shows that the only viable strategy to solve the current crisis is to work on a new vision of the roles and value of all the social components for the benefit of the State.

The international community has taken numerous important steps in terms of minorities protection (UN declaration on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, 1992; UN declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, 2007; Council of Europe's European charter for regional and minority languages, 1992; Council of Europe framework convention for the protection of national minorities, 1995; UNESCO's universal declaration of

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9 Interview in: Del Re E. C., *We, the last Christians of Iraq*, Film Documentary, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/139202991>, (retrieved: September 2015)

10 Kymlicka W. and Pfösti E. (eds.), *Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

Cultural Diversity, 2001). Many states in the Middle East are starting to use their legislative and constitutional measures regarding minorities as an indicator of democracy. However, the respect for human rights is not guaranteed by legislative acts, and some approaches to the problem that are inspired by Western models might be not easily applicable in everyday life, where ancient prejudices, granitic hierarchies and rank systems reign.

Human Rights are in my view the challenge of this century, because their universality is difficult to implement in social-political contexts where the concept of 'human' is overshadowed by the different labels derived from ethnic, gender, age, religious and other, that determine the position of an individual in his/her social hierarchy.

### **Twentyone rays**

The Yazidi sun with its twentyone rays has not shined for months on the horizontal white, green and red stripes of the Iraqi-Kurdish flag. Clouds of violence obscure it.

In Lalish, near Duhok, the quietness of the hill lavishing with Olive trees and small holy caves, with little houses scattered around the geometrical spires of the Yazidi temple, has been upset by the heartrending cry of thousand of Yazidi on the lam.

They are the target, for the seventy-fourth time in their history, of an ethnic-religious persecution. The merciless Islamic State is persecuting them. The story of the Yazidi has horrified the entire world and has stimulated reactions and aid. Nevertheless, their tragedy seems to disperse in the large tangles of history, because also the Christians<sup>11</sup>, in Iraq are persecuted, and so are the Muslims, the Arabs, the Kurds, the Turkmens, the Assyrian...

My Yazidi friends from Iraq and from the diaspora communities all over the world, publish on the social media photos of members of their community in tears, and broken down corpses heaped, children with empty looks. And on the Facebook page of our agency EPOS, to the Yaizidi posts that denounce the horror, the Christians, Kurds, Turkmen comment that the tragedy is affecting also them, as if they were all rings of an endless chain. Some Kurdish intellectuals are starting to say that the problem is Islam itself and that there is no peace with Islam. Some dare to profess themselves as atheists. The internet become the privileged 'non-place' where any opinion can be expressed.

The Yazidi are only one of the many faces of this world, a world that seems to have noticed this ancient community only because of the recent events, although it has very ancient origins and has resided in many countries in the Middle East and in the Caucasus for centuries.

11 Del Re E. C., *We, the last Christians of Iraq*, Film Documentary, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/139202991> (retrieved: September 2015)

The descriptions that have proliferated recently on the international media are paradoxical. A situation similar to that of the Ossetians, when their existence was discovered due to the conflict in Georgia. The problem is that wrong information about ethnic groups in contexts where there is an ongoing persecution can be very dangerous and exposes the members of the community to enormous risks. It is not by chance that the Yazidi are extremely cautious in opening to the external world, because their belief has been too often misrepresented as a very 'primitive' form of religion, and therefore not acceptable by the religions of the Book (Christians, Jews and Muslims).

In October 2013, the documentary *Following the Peacock* by the German anthropologist Ezster Spat was presented at the Film Festival in Duhok, the fourth town in Iraqi-Kurdistan. The Yazidi who were in the audience, including some leaders of the community, reacted with strong resentment, because according to them the documentary depicts the Yazidi as mere 'worshippers of idols' (referring to the little brass peacock shown in the film, that is taken in procession from village to village), in this way misinterpreting and distorting their identity, exposing them to high risks. In the audience there were people who replied angrily that the film showed the Yazidi for what they really are, that is worshippers of idols and of the devil, and that the Yazidi must admit to be such. The tension reached a high level.

In concise terms it can be affirmed that the risk that derives from showing the Yazidi only through one of their rituals based on the symbolism of the peacock, lies in the fact that in the Quran the Yazidi Peacock-Angel Melek Tā'ūs, is associated with Shaytan (Satan), which is one of the reasons why in Islam they are feared.

The importance of the peacock as a symbol for the Yazidi is explained through a foundation myth: Melek Tā'ūs, an angel with anthropomorphic appearance, after having been disowned by God and having departed, repented. Having filled some jars with his own tears, he used the liquid to extinguish the fire bars of the prison in which he had been confined. The angel was then pardoned by God, and returned to be the guardian of the world and of humanity. This is why the Yazidi are accused of being the Devil's worshippers. This labeling as Devil's worshippers, which is centuries old, has laid the basis for persecutions and discrimination. It is worth mentioning that before the recent violence by the Islamic State, the Yazidi had already been indicated as dangerous infidels by Al Qaida in Iraq, and were condemned to indiscriminate persecution and killings.

During Saddam Hussein regime (1979-2003) the Yazidi, together with the Kurds, the Turkmen and the Shabak, were the target of *Amfal*, that is Saddam's project to implement a complete 'arabization' of the country. Saddam aimed at transforming Iraq in the greatest Arab state. The project could only be realized by allowing on its territory the presence of one single population of Arabic origin, language and culture. It is known that the project implied the use of chemical

weapons such as those used in Halabja in 1988.<sup>12</sup>

In the framework of the arabization project, groups of people were moved and relocated in different areas. The Yazidi were forced to move from their homes to other areas and relocated in collectivized villages. They were asked to abandon the use of their language, and acquire a new identity. Nevertheless, they managed to keep their integrity.

In 2007 the first signs of new persecutions were manifested by a coordinated attack with four car-bombs that killed five hundred Yazidi in two villages, injuring more than one thousand and five hundred of them. The attack did not attract much attention on the international arena, but was the sign of a persecution that had never stopped and was ongoing. In summer 2014, the Yazidi were attacked by the Islamic State: the seventyfourth persecution they have suffered from in their history.

Virtually unknown to the international community, the Yazidi today have more voice than in the past, also because they are represented at institutional level in the Iraqi Government. Vian Dakhil is a member of the Iraqi Parliament, the only representative of the Yazidi. She moved the world when she burst into tears in 2014 crying "Save the Yazidi".<sup>13</sup>

The name Yazidi, according to one historical interpretation, derives from Yazid ibn Muawiya, the second Calif of the Omayyad dynasty of the XI century, another reason why Islam does not accept the Yazidi. Yazid ibn Muawiya is hated by the Muslims for having exterminated the family of Imam al-Husayn ibn ʿAlī and the family of the nephew of Muhammad himself in Kerbelā. Another version, probably more reliable, sustains that the name Yazidi derives from the Persian term *ized*, that means "angel" or 'God's adorer'.

For the Wahhabi, the Yazidi are apostates. For the radical Sunni, the Yazidi are 'Devil's adorers'. Although I shall not indulge in a deep analysis of the nature and origin of Yazidism, I shall mention some elements to understand it. Although Yazidism is a non-Abrahamic belief, it is directly connected to the roots of indo-european cultures, and it is present in the Middle East and Asia since millennia. It is a syncretic religion in which many elements from other religions and beliefs have merged during the centuries: pre-Islamic beliefs, Islamic Mysticism, Mithraism, Manicheism, kabalistic Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism. For example, Yazidism presents elements such as circumcision, baptism with water, the belief in metempsychosis that will continue until the day of the Final Judgment in which everybody will be welcomed in Paradise, and other elements. The adoration of the fire is related to the cult of Zoroaster, which is in its turn a cult intertwined with central Asian cultures. The sacred books of Yazidism are the 'Rev-

12 1988: Thousands die in Halabja gas attack, *BBC News*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/16/newsid\\_4304000/4304853.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/16/newsid_4304000/4304853.stm) (retrieved: September 2015)

13 Heartbreaking Speech: Vian Dakhil, Iraqi Yazidi MP in Tears, Youtube, *Syrian Perspective*, 7 August 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNqedlqXi8w> (retrieved: September 2015)



elation Book' and the 'Black Book', although the principles of belief have mainly been transmitted orally from generation to generation: a defense strategy to escape the persecutions during the centuries and to preserve their cultural and religious patrimony.

## Denied

The Yazidi population has been decimated through forced conversions to Islam and repeated slaughters. When in 1892 the Ottoman troops entered the valley of Lalish, in which the main temple of the Yazidi is located (near Duhok in Iraqi-Kurdistan), they perpetrated a massacre that decimated the population. They even destroyed one of the most important Yazidi places of worship: the mausoleum of Shaykh Adi ibn Mustafa, father and founder of all the Yazidi, who died in 1162, and reformed the Yazidi religion in the XII century.

The reactions to the abovementioned documentary by Spat in 2013 find an explanation in the fact that it is the perception of Yazidism as a non-religion, as a form of superstition that has motivated many persecutions, and therefore the representation of a single ritual extrapolated from the wider religious context is felt by the Yazidi as dangerous and offensive.

A danger that lies unexpected also in people outside the territory of Iraq. In a comment to my documentary on the Yazidi entitled *The Denied Yazidi Festival*,<sup>14</sup> a person wrote a comment on *youtube* where the film is available, saying that he noted that on the walls of the Yazidi temple there appears also a symbol similar to the Star of David (or David's Shield). The person has written: "I knew they [the Yazidi ] have ransacked many religions, but I did not know they went as far as stealing David's Shield!". I have replied to him that I would not use the term 'ransack' especially in relation to that symbol, as it is present in the heritage of many cultures although it is nowadays mainly attributed to Judaism.

My documentary, that was filmed before the beginning of the persecution by the Islamic State in summer 2014, when the Yazidi were still unknown and I was one of the few visitors, shows that already in October 2013 there had been signs of strong tensions in Iraq and in Iraqi-Kurdistan with heavy consequences for the Yazidi.

The documentary shows the fact that in October 2013 the most important Yazidi festival called *Jazhna Jamaye* (also transliterated as *Cejna Cemaiya*, the Festival of the Assembly), that takes place in Lalish Temple in Iraqi Kurdistan every year and gathers around twenty thousands Yazidi from all over the world, had been canceled for security reasons. The impact of such decision taken by the Governorate of Duhok on the Yazidi community can be understood if one hypothesizes the impact of the cancellation of Christmas for the Christians.

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14 Del Re E. C., *The Denied Yazidi Festival. The voice and Future of the Yazidi*, Documentary-Film, 2014, <http://youtu.be/08181R5z0qY> (retrieved: September 2015)

The security reasons were due to the fact that in September 2013 there had been an attack in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi-Kurdistan (KRG), that had made the level of alert rise. The authorities of KRG had thought that it would have been better to avoid a gathering of thousands of people in the same place. Moreover, there were signs of the rising of forms of intolerance towards minorities: a spill over effect from bordering areas in Iraq where the sectarian tensions were increasing.

In the same period, October 2013, I had filmed the inauguration of a Christian church in a village not far from the Yazidi temple, in which it emerged clearly that the coexistence between different religious communities was serene and based on cooperation at local level, very distant from the political issues at regional or at national level. The attack occurred in Erbil in September 2013 had changed the perspective, because the ongoing conflict in Baghdad was expanding to a reasonably stable area like KRG and the fear of the domino effect was high.

At the Yazidi festival, cancelled but still attracting a significant number of people, security controls were very serious. I had been invited to take part in the festival by some Yazidi friends, and therefore although I was at first shocked by the cancellation, that meant that some major rituals would have not been celebrated, I decided to film the effects of the cancellation itself, and of the security risks. This is why the film is entitled "The *denied* Yazidi Festival".

Sleeping in the open air in a roofless little house on the hills of Lalish temple, accompanied by the sound of epic and religious songs, I conversed until late night with the family that was hosting me and my collaborators. The tension was high because it was forbidden to walk in the woods that were patrolled by heavily armed Kurdish Peshmerga who would shoot on sight. The Yazidi Priests were celebrating rituals despite the situation, justifying their decision, as Baba Chawish, the second most important religious leader of the Yazidi, explains in the documentary, by saying that they were there at the service of the believers and therefore they did what they demanded. Despite the reduced number of participants, the Festival saw the presence of prominent representatives of the diaspora from Germany, where the largest group of Yazidi in Europe lives. At sunset, the ritual of the 'lighting of fires' in the thousand niches around the temple accompanied by chants, emanated spirituality.

The fact that only a small percentage of the usual participants in the festival had decided to go, has made people reflect on their social, economic and political condition. Interviewing young Yazidi,<sup>15</sup> what emerges is the awareness of the security risks and of the difficult position in society for members of minorities, that makes their future uncertain. Social mobility is not easy in Iraqi society, because of strong extended family and tribal networks. Members of minorities do not reach high positions easily, although in Iraqi-Kurdistan the government policies have tried to favor peaceful coexistence also encouraging a more balanced

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15 Interviews in: Del Re E. C., *The Denied Yazidi Festival*. *Op.cit.*

political representation. Yet there are other obstacles to full recognition, such as education, that is a most sensitive issue. The Yazidi can now access schools up to the twelfth grade, as Pir Xidir, the intellectual voice of the Yazidi, Intellectual voice of the Yazidi, Author of the schoolbook *Ezidyati* and Former Member of Parliament, affirms<sup>16</sup>, but until recently it was difficult for the Yazidi to access schools, and this left them behind in society. The Iraqi-Kurdistan policies as regards minorities have truly allowed a more serene social climate. The Constitution of Iraq recognizes the Yazidi as an ethnic and religious minority. They have a seat in the Parliament of Baghdad and three seats in the Regional Parliament of Kurdistan. Their political representation must be granted in the municipalities in which the Yazidi presence is particularly significant in proportion to the population. For instance, in the Governorate of Niniveh they have the right to three seats, one in Kirkuk, and two in Diyala province. Nevertheless, the political debate to obtain more representation in Iraqi-Kurdistan is ongoing.<sup>17</sup>

Interviewing the Yazidi representatives highest in rank, it emerged that the proverbial secretive attitude of their community has been a defense measure for centuries, although it has caused diffidence towards them and the development of prejudices and false information on them. The cohesion and closure is explicitated in the structure of their community, which protects itself by being based on the rule that membership is based on lineage and neither inter-religious marriages nor conversions are allowed. Pir Xidir points out that the Yazidi do not engage in proselytism, which is a guarantee for other ethnic or religious groups, in his view, that the Yazidi do not constitute a danger for them.<sup>18</sup> The closure implies also a strong pressure on Yazidi individuals to be an active part in his/her community. The expulsion from the community is the most serious and tragic sanction, although very rare, which in the Yazidi belief would also imply the loss of the soul.

The Yazidi are divided in two groups: religious and priestly families, and lay families. The priestly families are divided in two subgroups: *Sheikh* e *Pir*. The *Sheikh* chairs the majority of religious festivals, while the *Pir* celebrates Baptisms, weddings, funerals. Lay families are demanded to grant the subsistence of the religious families. Marriages between the members of the different groups are forbidden, which has created a system of casts based on a hierarchy that in recent times has started to be felt as a form of excessive oppression especially by young people, who are not immune to stimulus from the globalized society. In my view, one of the worst effects of the recent persecution by the Islamic State and the consequent breaking up of many Yazidi communities - whose members are now

16 Interview in: Del Re E. C., *The Denied Yazidi Festival*. Op.cit.

17 Behn S., "Minorities in Iraq's Kurdistan Push for Greater Political Voice", *Voice of America*, 10 August 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/minorities-in-iraq-kurdistan-push-for-greater-political-voice/2910051.html> (retrieved: September 2015)

18 Interviews in: Del Re E. C., *The Denied Yazidi Festival*. Op.cit.

scattered all over the world, or have become the victims of the violence - is the fact that it has interrupted an ongoing process of change, which was supported also by Pir Xidir who told me that he was aware that his people were unsatisfied and that a revolution and a change was needed within their community.<sup>19</sup>

The denied festival in October 2013 was the sign that what happened a year after with the persecution by the Islamic State was not *ex abrupto*, but was the consequence of an escalation due to difficult conditions such as exclusion and marginalization, which were present also in Kurdistan, despite the wise policies of President Barzani. The latent risk was there, and also the international community is accused of having ignored it, despite the Yazidi had been the target of persecutions for seventy-three times before the latest by the Islamic State. Aziz Tamoyan, head of the Yazidi Union in Armenia has affirmed that: "If U.S. really wished to do something, they would solve the issue long ago".<sup>20</sup>

Exclusion and discrimination towards the Yazidi was not apparent until the attacks by the Islamic State, except to those who observed everyday life social dynamics.

In Iraq most Yazidi live in Yazidi communities in villages. Those who live in mixed communities as in urban contexts and cover various social and professional positions in society, are integrated. Nevertheless, the separation remains, as the following episode suggests. A young Iraqi-Kurdish collaborator of mine in *My Future*<sup>21</sup>, a project that I have created and direct aimed at rebuilding the Syrian civil society working with the Syrian Refugees in the camps in Iraqi-Kurdistan, belongs to the Yazidi community. One day he invited my other collaborators and me, together with some Iraqi-Kurdish professors from the University of Duhok, to lunch at his home where his mother had cooked a big meal for all of us. All the Iraqi-Kurdish professors declined the invitation, and I insisted with one of them who had just given a lecture to the Syrian refugees on tolerance and mutual respect, to accept the invitation. He also declined, explaining that he could not accept the invitation for religious reasons, because the Muslims can accept food from the hands of members of the religions of the Book (Christians and Jews) but not from the hands of others, including the Yazidi.

### Consequences of the Islamic State attack in 2014

The Yazidi are mainly Kurds, although they origins are debated and some define themselves as belonging to a unique ethnic group. In Armenia they consti-

19 Interviews in: Del Re E. C., *The Denied Yazidi Festival*. *Op.cit.*

20 Head of Yazidi union: 74th genocide being perpetrated against my nation, *News.am*, 19 August 2014, <http://news.am/eng/news/224617.html> (retrieved: September 2015)

21 It is a project run by EPOS, funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign affairs and Cooperation. See: *My Future Syria. With the refugees to rebuild the Syrian civil society*, Film-documentary directed by Del Re E. C., 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqBazrHgjRU> (retrieved: September 2015)

tute the most numerous religious minority with an estimated sixtyfive thousand people. In Europe the largest community is in Germany, with an estimated two hundred thousand Yazidi. Others live today in Iraq (half a million), Syria (seventy thousand), Turkey (eighteen thousand), Sweden (four thousand), Russia (ninety thousand), France (one thousand), United States (ten thousand)<sup>22</sup>. The relationship with Turkey is still tense. Many sources report the fact that at the beginning of the XX century the Yazidi were persecuted by the Turks who accused them of having helped the Armenians. The Yazidi who were fleeing from Turkey found shelter in Georgia, Armenia and Russia, and in Germany.

The actual consistency of the statistics regarding the Yazidi is a political issue as it is in many countries where there are minorities, for example in F.Y.R. Macedonia or the Balkans in general.<sup>23</sup> The latest census in Iraq took place in 1987. A new census is constantly postponed. According to the previous census carried out in 1965 the Yazidi constituted one per cent of the Iraqi population, that at that time consisted eight million people. If such percentage had kept stable during the years, the Yazidi today would be three hundred thousand, given that the actual population of Iraq is about thirty-three million (2012 estimates). However, persecutions and migration – which is the most feared phenomenon of all the minorities in the Middle East – might have reduced the number. Pir Xidir told me in an interview that he thinks that they are half a million, that would make the proportion of one seat only in the KRG Parliament under-representative.

A report by IOM in 2011 sustained that there were around two-hundred-thirty thousand Yazidi in the district of Sinjar in Iraq. If this is a reliable number, then the whole community would have grown significantly, probably up to seven-hundred thousand. According to various theories<sup>24</sup> there is a connection between the level of education and fertility. Although this is debatable, the growth of the Yazidi population during the years has been explained through this equation, basing the assumption on the statistics reported by IOM in 2011 according to which the Yazidi illiteracy rate was 69%.<sup>25</sup> Interesting enough, the report in 2011 was already denouncing an appalling social situation – marginalization, exclusion, unemployment, discrimination, episodes of violence – that was causing a

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22 The statistics here quoted are the result of the crossing of various sources, given that reliable data is not available.

23 See: Todorova M., *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1997; Friedman V. A., Language and Ethnicity in Balkan politics: Macedonian, Bulgarian and Albanian, paper presented at the seminar of *East European Studies "Languages and Ethnicity in the Balkans"*, Meeting Report no. 215, 11 April 2000, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/215-languages-and-ethnicity-balkan-politics-macedonian-bulgarian-and-albanian> (Retrieved: July 2015); Del Re E. C., Language and education issues in the Balkans: policies, conflicts, resolutions, prospects, in: *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 5, 2013, pp.189-217

24 See for example: Graff H. J., Literacy, Education, and Fertility, Past and Present: A Critical Review, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1979, pp. 105-140; Cochrane S. H., *Fertility and education: what do we really know?*, Washington. D.C., Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979

25 IOM-IRAQ *Special Report*, 2011, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full%20Report\\_279.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full%20Report_279.pdf) (retrieved: september 2015)

dramatic increase in the suicide rate amongst the Yazidi living in the areas of Sinjar and Niniveh!

Illiteracy has been a huge problem for the Yazidi for centuries. The struggle to accede all grades at school and to reach the university level has become fundamental for all the minorities in Iraq - also for the Christians and the others - who have adopted the strategy of excelling in education to overcome the obstacles in social mobility they encounter being members of a minority.

Thamer Alyas, a Yazidi collaborator of mine in his twenties, during the first wave of persecution in 2014 found shelter in Turkey with his family. He wrote to me:

"It is a nightmare for us to be obliged to experience persecution for the seventy-fourth time in history. The last one had taken place in 2007, in the same place. We still cannot believe that the world did not know anything at that time, although the violence lasted more than six days. Today we are witnessing another genocide, because this is what my parents tell me. My parents, who have seen horrible times, say that we Yazidi are slaughtered today as we were in the past. What we ask for now is to allow the kidnapped girls to return home: they are more than three thousand and nobody knows where they are. Our martyrs are now thousands, and we implore the European Union to open the doors to those who want to leave this land. The Yazidi cannot live where their relatives are slaughtered, and being a young Yazidi, I do not see any future for the Yazidi community in Iraq. We must go away, no matter how. What future for us, when we see our mother and sister being raped in front of our eyes?"<sup>26</sup>

This tragic picture of the situation is drawn by the same young Yazidi who had said only a year before in the interview that I have included in my documentary filmed in October 2013, that he felt that being a Yazidi in Iraqi-Kurdistan was a very positive thing and that he liked being Yazidi in that social context.<sup>27</sup>

Thousands have fled their homes to escape the jihadist militias of the Islamic State. Amongst these, many gathered on the sadly famous Jebel Sinjar, a mountain chain that from the town of Sinjar, west of Mosul, reaches the height of 1.500 meters from where it dominates the Jazīra plane between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. In the caves and the on the highlands of Sinjar, that delineates the border between Iraq and Syria, between forty and seventy thousand Yazidi found shelter to escape the fierce persecution of the IS that had conquered the town of Sinjar and annexed it to the Caliphate in summer 2014.

The approximation of the numbers of internally displaced Yazidi (IDPs) is due to the fact that not only the people have not all gone to the same place and therefore it is difficult to count them, but it is also due to the fact that numbers are once again a political issue and are the motivation for intervention. While the Yazidi had stated a high number of displaced people gathering on Sinjar moun-

26 Private letter, with permission to be published.

27 Interview in: Del Re E. C., *The Denied Yazidi Festival*. Op.cit.

tain, a mission organized by the Pentagon to verify whether a rescue mission was needed, declared that it was not necessary given that the refugees were far fewer than expected.<sup>28</sup> Fortunately two days later the the Iraqi air force together with the Kurdish Peshmerga carried out a rescue mission at Mount Sinjar, which the CNN defined as 'heroic'.<sup>29</sup>

The stories of the extreme brutalities of the IS against the Yazidi are horrifying. It is true that some Yazidi have converted to Islam being threatened to be killed, but it is also true that they had been separated from their wives and daughters who had been offered as war booty to jihady militias in Syria. Other Yazidi have refused apostasy and have been killed. Men, women and children have been buried alive in common graves. In Kocho, a small village near Mosul, on the 16th of August 2014 there were more than eighty corpses lying on the streets, mainly Yazidi...

Running away, the Yazidi have taken many directions. Those who have relatives in the countries where there is a diaspora group have left Iraq. Around Duhok there are more than hundred thousand refugees. The Turkish government has set up a refugee camp to host sixteen thousand people from Iraq, amongst which six thousand Yazidi. Around two thousand Yazidi have gone to the Turkish province of Şırnak, in particular in the town of Silopi where they have been assisted by the local population. Another group of six hundred Yazidi has found shelter in Cizre, again near Şırnak. The Governor of Şırnak, Hasan İpek, last year went to see the Governor of Duhok in KRG to discuss with him on how to face the situation and coordinate.

Thousands have gone to Lalish Temple and are protected by the Peshmerga who preside the temple and the surrounding areas.

The region is over-burdened by the movement of refugees that move from one side to the other: a catastrophe that resembles a despairing chess game. The camps already settled for the refugees from Syria are useless for the Yazidi IDPs because they do not go there for a number of reasons some of which have been mentioned above. They look for shelter either where they can stay together, either at some relative's houses.

From Turkey hundreds of Yazidi have moved to Greece. The Greek authorities confirmed that more and more Yazidi were directed to Greece. Kaiti Kehayoglou, UNHCR representative in Greece, declared that also in that country there were requests of international protection by a constantly increasing number of Yazidi

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28 De Young K., Whitlock C., Rescue mission for Yazidis on Iraq's Mount Sinjar appears unnecessary, Pentagon says, *Washington Post*, 14 August 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2014/08/13/5fdd3358-2301-11e4-86ca-6f03cbd15c1a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2014/08/13/5fdd3358-2301-11e4-86ca-6f03cbd15c1a_story.html) (retrieved: September 2015)

29 Ford D., Levs J., 'Heroic' mission rescues desperate Yazidis from ISIS, *CNN*, 16 August 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/11/world/meast/iraq-rescue-mission/> (retrieved: September 2015)

coming from Iraq and Syria.<sup>30</sup>

In the mean time in Germany some three hundred Yazidi who were protesting against the violence of ISIS in Herford, in the Westfalian region, were attacked with stones and sticks by a group of Sunni Muslims. The German police dispersed the crowd, and the German government declared that the counter Islamic terrorism measures would be intensified.<sup>31</sup> Ten thousand Yazidi demonstrated in the streets of Berlin, Hanover and elsewhere, asking the German Government to put pressure on the international community to intervene in Iraq to protect the persecuted Yazidi community. Those demonstrations had some effects: on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 2014, the promised aid became reality, because the German Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen announced that Germany would send also military equipment to Iraqi-Kurdistan. Yazidi women have also demonstrated in Erbil in front of the Parliament, to ask the Kurdish Government to protect them and to adopt adequate security measures to contrast the advancing of the Islamic State. More recently, the Minister has affirmed that Germany will train that some Yazidi in Iraq to create a force to fight against ISIS.<sup>32</sup>

It is well known that the peaceful Yazidi have taken arms to fight against the Islamic State. Some Yazidi have been trained in Syria, near the town of Derik by the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Unit) which is coordinated by the PKK. The Yazidi have become part of the the Sinjar Resistance, a self-defense army, that would soon return to Sinjar to protect the Yazidi villages.

The reason why it is important to mention all these events, which might simply appear as a routine consequence of a war, is that despite being horrid, the recent events have caused a true revolution in the Yazidi community from many perspectives. The demonstrations that have taken place in Germany, have been an incentive for the Yazidi in Iraqi-Kurdistan to organize public demonstrations in the towns of Duhok and Suleimani, where this kind of democratic exercises are virtually nonexistent. Although not in big numbers, the demonstrators have yelled slogans and have shown banners denouncing the violence against the Yazidi, calling it a 'genocide'. And the genocide against the Yazidi is a Kurdish affair, because the Yazidi are also Kurds. But it is also an international issue. In front of the massacre of the Yazidi community and the Islamic State advance towards Erbil, the capital of KRG, where most part of the international diplomatic personnel moved from Baghdad for security reasons during the crisis last year, the American government has decided to intervene militarily. In a long press conference

30 Onisenko C., Persecuted by jihadists, Yazidis flee to Greece, *Ekathimerini*, 26 August 2014, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/162535/article/ekathimerini/community/persecuted-by-jihadists-yazidis-flee-to-greece> (retrieved: September 2015)

31 Yazidis rally in Germany against ISIS, DW, 9 August 2014, <http://www.dw.com/en/yazidis-rally-in-germany-against-isis/a-17843457> (retrieved: September 2015)

32 Germany to train Yazidi force to combat ISIS as hundreds remain stranded on Mount Sinjar, *Breitbart*, 23 June 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/06/23/germany-to-train-yazidi-force-to-combat-isis-as-hundreds-remain-stranded-on-mount-sinjar/> (retrieved: September 2015)



at the White House, President Obama authorized air strikes against the Islamic State, although he affirmed clearly that this would not drag the USA in a new war. The first strikes have taken place on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2014 far from Sinjar, in the surroundings of Erbil. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, some artillery positions of the Islamic State have been attacked near Sinjar. The strikes are ongoing, targeting the positions of the Islamic State in Iraq. The question of genocide has been functional to the US intervention.

### **The phoenix effect**

In a very exaggerated video publicized on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 2014 on Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Google+, the Islamic State proudly shows the first group of Yazidi who have converted to Islam. In the video, that according to experts is authentic and had been filmed a few weeks earlier, the Jihadi militias show off kindness and affability towards Yazidi men who have become Muslims renegading their religion. The men interviewed in the video invite their Yazidi brothers to descend from the Sinjar Mountain and to join the community of the Islamic State where, it is heard in the video, they will be welcomed with open arms and will be protected by the guerrilla fighters from external threats.<sup>33</sup>

What is mostly worrying about the Islamic State, is the 'spin-off', which derives from their ability to persuade. The Islamic State has triggered a constantly latent mechanism that has been put in motion as soon as the equilibriums on which coexistence between different ethnic or/and religious groups in a certain area is based are altered. In this context, in Iraq there have been numerous episodes – although kept secret for the most part – in which neighbors have denounced their neighbors on the basis of ethnic or religious belonging. Arabs against Kurds and vice versa, and Kurds belonging to different religious communities against each other.

It is true, though, that in Kirkuk until 2014 many women fleeing from domestic violence in other areas of Iraq were welcomed by local activists and NGOs whichever ethnic or religious group they belonged to, whether they were Christian, Muslim, Arab or Kurdish, or other. The common denominator was gender and their victimhood. Now there is a new social fracture that is always latent and reemerges in certain crises. The Islamic State has affirmed itself in a situation which was already very tense because of the tug of war between Erbil and Baghdad that had been going on for months in 2014, caused, amongst other reasons, by the question of oil revenues. The position of the KRG made Baghdad start a strict policy that severely hit the Kurdish population: the salaries were not paid for months by the central Iraqi government. The effects of this policy and of the lack of negotiation between Erbil and Baghdad, created a very distressed

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33 The video was available at the following link, but has been removed by *youtube* because of its offensive content.: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lduML2R1cy0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lduML2R1cy0) (retrieved: August 2014)

social climate. The Islamic State has found a fertile ground to affirm itself, becoming a wedge in these existing cracks, exalting the differences. There have been Muslims feeling persecuted by Muslims, who have welcomed a new initiative like the Islamic State with interest, as an opportunity to solve local tensions mirroring wider national issues.

The Islamic State has divided and united at the same time. In this complex context, the Kurdish identity has found a new unifying afflatus and the Yazidi community has experienced a notoriety never experienced before. The Yazidi community has been forcibly exposed, somehow, to the world, and if the consequences have been horrifying, on one hand, on the other have constituted a regeneration on various levels. The rigid hierarchy, based not only on rank but also on gender and age class, has been to a certain extent overturned.

Young Yazidi, more knowledgeable as regards new technology, have had the opportunity to emerge. The thousands of journalists who have flooded the areas inhabited by the Yazidi, the Temple of Lalish, have given the members of the community the opportunity to experience new communication strategies, a new language. Hundreds are the Facebook pages opened in favor of the Yazidi cause, and also the diaspora communities have enhanced their activities through social media. Through EPOS I have financially supported an initiative organized by Luqman Suleiman, the spokesperson of the Yazidi community in Iraq, who has organized a photographic exhibition on the Yazidi in Yerevan, Armenia.

Some other initiatives by Yazidi, have been inspired by the situation, and survive because of the funds that come from the international community. A praiseworthy initiative is 'Humanity', a multiethnic and multireligious NGO funded in Duhok by Thamer Alyas, my young Yazidi collaborator with some of his young Iraqi friends, aimed at helping Yazidi IDPs.

These initiatives are totally new to the Yazidi community and constitute a significant change. The forced opening of the Yazidi community to the world, and the interference of the world into the inter-ethnic relations in Iraq which has followed the explosion of the crisis caused by the Islamic State, have deeply changed also the Kurdish and Iraqi mentality in general. The language has changed, starting with the fact that the Yazidi are now usually defined as brothers by the Christians and by the Muslims, stressing on the fact that their tragedy is the tragedy of human beings. What unites the different communities the most is the common enemy, and the pressure deriving from being under the eyes of a wider global community.

Stressing upon these aspects, it might seem that the recent tragic events have also paradoxically had positive consequences, as they have favored an openness that can prove to be beneficial in the future for the Iraqi society. The phoenix effect, as I call it. Nevertheless, as I have sustained in the past as regards other conflicts, if the changes are not the result of a transformation of individuals or groups from within, they risk to be temporary or superficial, dependent on contingent

events and destined to vanish.

As regards the Yazidi, in fact, in my view the real devastating effect that the Islamic State attacks have had on their community, is the interruption of the 'natural' evolution of the community, with its own steps and modes. Communities are not static, and the Yazidi were going through a phase of renewal, as I mentioned above, especially as regards the youth. Many youngsters were proposing innovative reforms, supported by senior authoritative members of the community like Pir Xidir: changes related to the hierarchical structure of the community, to the rigid division in groups and the prescriptions related to the marriages. This would have nourished new lymph in the community, preparing it for its future in the globalized world. Now, the Islamic State has abruptly interrupted the process, and has made the community, that had struggled to find a position in the Iraqi society, fall again in the condition of inexorable vulnerability, victimhood, which means marginality and exclusion, piety, fragmentation to find a safe place, grieving diaspora, concentration on protection strategies rather than on propulsive opportunities of affirmation in the world.

There is a generation of Yazidi that is too engaged in protecting its families to be able to learn from the elders how to inherit their legacy with wisdom and progressive perspectives. The generation of those who would have taken the leading positions is lost because it has been dispersed and has been engaged in other issues, endangering the centrality of their Yazidi identity for the individual. A lost generation whose loss is a loss for all the world.

### **A Middle East without minorities**

The crisis caused by the emergence of the Islamic State has had a strong effect on the international community especially because of the communication strategies adopted. Those strategies have been and are particularly effective – although the events and the situation are similar to many other ongoing crises in other parts of the world – because in order to hit and challenge the Western populations emotionally and intellectually, it has used their very own language.

This has also risen questions about the perception of the Middle East and the so-called 'third countries' in general, pointing out the fact that the same concepts – rights, religion, law and other – can be interpreted in opposite ways using the same terminology. This is probably the most frightening and most challenging issue, because if the narrative is the same but the meaning varies, it is difficult to contrast concepts such a 'law': in the eyes of those who apply a law, the prevailing quality of the concept is the juridical value of the norm, not the content and meaning of the norm itself. The 'law' is the 'law', whatever it means. In this framework, many countries in the world have responded to stimulus from the so-called international community by adopting reforms that have harmonized their system to that of the global trend.

The emergence of the Islamic State has stressed out the issue whether the Middle East constitutes an exception as regards the global trend towards multiculturalism. In reality, as it has been mentioned, there is a great variety of attitudes and responses to the issue in the Middle East. Policies and laws on minorities in Iraqi-Kurdistan have been constantly debated. In 2013, for example, Iraqi-Kurdistan drew a list of 'rights of national groups, religions and religious communities of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.' There was a discussion over the fact that while recognizing many groups – the Assyrians complained that they were not recognized – the listing was a way of affirming that the Kurds were the majority. Moreover, the Shabak accused KRG of trying to implement a *Kurdification* process, for example by forcing the Shabak schools to teach Kurdish. Regarding the Yazidi, according to Mamouri, there was a scandal triggered by documents published by *Wikileaks* that revealed that there was an escalation of tension between the KRG and the Yazidi about the increasing control over their communities for alleged security reasons. Also the Turkmen complained about exclusion policies in KRG, denouncing that a process of *Kurdification* is taking place. Mamouri concluded:

"Although the situation for minorities in Iraqi Kurdistan is much better than that in other regions of Iraq — as well as in some other countries of the region — there is an urgent need for the Kurds to avoid a policy of building a nationalist state. They must distribute power between all the components of society, through delegating wider powers to them and allowing them to participate in the formulation of the political and cultural identity of their regions. This is what will ensure their long-term stability and continuity."<sup>34</sup>

The situation in Iraqi-Kurdistan today is as it has been depicted above: a land striving to find equilibrium between ambitions to independence, refugee crises, oil revenues, relationship with the central government of Baghdad and other. This shows that the region with its minorities is a striking example of some of the most relevant issues regarding minorities in the Middle East.

Amongst the most significant elements for a thorough analysis of the problems related to minorities there are:

The fact that religious identity is becoming a stronger element in the hierarchy of individual identities. Despite being accused of aiming at *Kurdification*, the KRG has understood that it is important to work on the different layers of identity to guarantee a peaceful coexistence between minorities: one's own identity, group identity, 'nation' identity (ethnicity), 'state' identity (citizenship).

the risk intrinsic to ignoring others' religions: what is needed is to work on interfaith dialogue and mutual recognition and knowing;

The need for a re-elaboration of political discourse. For instance, within the

34 Mamouri A., Iraqi Kurdistan Must Ensure Minority Rights, *Al Monitor*, 23 September 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/iraq-kurdistan-region-protect-minority-rights.html#ixzz3mLReYX7i> (retrieved: September 2015)

Muslim communities, Sunni and Shiites must find a balance between the social/political discourse and the reference to theological interpretations. There are movements of thought within Islam that demand this.

The threat of migration is more serious than persecution, as mentioned above. If migration is seen as the only solution, the community must find a way of becoming a reliable option, but only with the support of wise minority laws this is possible. Father Douglas Bazi, head of the Christian Chaldean parish Mar Eliya in Ainkawa (Erbil), is the director of an excellence private school for Christian children where they are taught in English and receive an education at international standards level.

Decrease in international aid and disinterest towards certain minorities: the immense flow of money given by the international community for aid is now perceived as a waste, because there is a sort of 'exhaustion' of social problems in the eyes of the global public opinion, by which certain ongoing sad situations are forgotten or underestimated unless there is a pressure based on emergency. This has happened as regards the Syrian Refugees and the Yazidi. The Refugees are now somehow gently pushed out of camps (and this is one of the reasons at the basis of the current refugee crisis in the European Union). Regarding the Yazidi, the huge amount of money given for the cures to about three hundred girls traumatized for having been kidnapped, are now perceived as symbolic and not a resolution for a much wider and deeper social problem, as mentioned in this study.

The denial of the need of a social-psychological reform that is not linked to religion but to tradition: the need to ease the pressure on the youth as regards the relationships between young people belonging to different genders (combined marriages, impossibility to communicate even in public space etc.); the political pressure that does not allow an open and free discussion on social problems; the lack of social mobility; the illusory richness based on status symbols and not on rights. All these cause a latent depression that affects the population and can manifest itself in unforeseeable ways.

All these threats affect the Yazidi community and the other minorities. The strategies to contrast the risks in my view must be focused on:

Reinforcing the self-awareness of the minorities (for example, the Yazidi did not know themselves – doctrine, position in society and other - until recently);

protecting intermediate generations: the succession in the Yazidi community is not anymore guaranteed, creating a power gap;

helping the diasporas: which are in my view the future of the minorities in these current times.

There are obviously a number of issues to take into consideration thinking about the future of minorities facing the attacks by the Islamic State, which is nevertheless in progressive decline.

It is urgent to plan the post-Islamic State period, by reinforcing the minority rights, by creating secure areas for the return of the IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), by making a proper plan for property restitution and reconstruction.

The real issue that emerges from the current situation is: “Why should we protect the minorities in the Middle East?”

The most recurring argument is that some minorities – for example the Yazidi – do not contribute actively in society, except for the interests of their own community, especially under the economic point of view. I reply by saying that minorities are actors of change, not necessarily with specific acts, but by their presence itself, as they constitute an essential element to counterbalance the majority in democracy.

As Gardikiotis<sup>35</sup> sustains, the influence of minorities is often thought of as a more innovative form of social change, because it usually involves a personal shift in private opinion. Without influential minorities challenging the majority view, there would be no new ideas or positive change in society.

Regarding the Yazidi and their future, it is clear that never before they have become a political actor and a social issue as they are now. Iraq must protect them – and the other minorities – because never before the level of protection of minorities has become an indicator of the level of democracy and pluralistic attitude of a government as today. The future and destiny of Iraq (and KRG within and without it) is closely linked to the future and destiny of its minorities today, of which the country (with all its internal components) is directly responsible. The future and the destiny of the Middle East is closely linked to the future and destiny of minorities.

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35 Gardikiotis A., *Minority influence*, in: *Social And Personality Psychology Compass*, No. 5, 9, 2011, pp. 679–693.

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## **ЈЕЗИДИ И ИСЛАМСКА ДРЖАВА, ИЛИ ЕФЕКТИ БЛИСКОГ ИСТОКА БЕЗ МАЊИНА НА ЕВРОПУ**

### **Сажетак**

Изненада је мало позната и затворена заједница Језида постала симбол зверстава Исламске државе (ИД) према мањинама и ризика који долазе од екстремизма. Јак удар ИД на Језиде и друге заједнице на Блиском истоку – хришћанске али и друге – је такође иницирао талас миграција према Европи. Ауторка је радила на терену Ирака и ирачког Курдистана од 2012., и истраживала Језиде давно пре ИД, правећи студије и документарце. Она сматра да су корени кризе били видљиви и пре саме кризе а да су физичке-психолошке последице на мањине много дубље, јер ударају на саму структуру и еволуцију њихових заједница. Ипак, унутрашњи ресурси заједница Језида и нови глобални сценарио су такође створили нове прилике. Миграција мањина је круцијално питање: иако константно у последњим деценијама, она сада озбиљно прети да угрози богату социјалну композицију региона као и стабилност заједница када се растуре у дијаспори. Европа мора помоћи земљама на Блиском истоку да заштите своје мањине јер су оне фундаментални елемент равнотеже моћи и друштвене динамике.

**Кључне речи:** мањине, Језиди, Исламска држава, миграције, Курдистан, Блиски исток

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