

Iraq's Yazidis: Among the World's Most Threatened Minorities

by Antonella Caruso

Pope Francis is scheduled to arrive in Iraq on 5 March 2021 for a historic three-day visit. The Holy Father aims to promote a message of hope and support to thousands of Iraqi Christians who have returned or are yet to return to their homes after the official defeat of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in December 2017.

The first-ever Pontifical visit will also include stops in Mosul and the Christian enclave of Qaraqosh, in northern Iraq, in a province which has been ground zero for so much violence and ethnic and religious cleansing over the past years. All minorities have suffered in Iraq – but none as much as the Yazidis, slaughtered by the thousands by IS militants. While other minorities have slowly returned home, the Yazidi future remains bleaker than ever.

Yazidism, a monotheistic faith of uncertain origins with elements from Islam, Zoroastrianism and Gnosticism, occupies a unique place in the ethnic

makeup of the Middle East.¹ Heretics deserving of execution in the eyes of extremist Islamists or devil worshippers for many others, the brutal massacres of Yazidis in 2014 sparked an international outcry as well as the first US airstrikes in Iraq since the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of the country.²

¹ Yazidis believe that God communicates to human beings through its divine emanations, or Angels. The first and highest in rank among them is Malek Taws, or the Peacock Angel, wrongly identified as Satan, who completed the creation of the universe and governs it. The Angels assume also human forms and descend on earth across human history. The places of their appearance are holy and shrines are built above them. Lalesh is the most sacred temple, where Adam was born and Malek Taws descended. Belonging to this sacred land is a strong feature of Yazidism. See for instance, Avi Asher-Schapiro, "Who Are the Yazidis, the Ancient, Persecuted Religious Minority Struggling to Survive in Iraq?", in *National Geographic News*, 11 August 2014, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/140809-iraq-yazidis-minority-isil-religion-history>.

² Liz Sly, "Exodus from the Mountain: Yazidis Flood into Iraq following U.S. Airstrikes", in *The Washington Post*, 10 August 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2014/08/10/yazidis-flood-iraq/>.

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The Yazidis continued to be massacred, tortured, enslaved and displaced over three years. The violence ended when IS was defeated in 2017 by the combined onslaught of a US-led international coalition along with the Iraqi army, Kurdish Peshmerga forces and a vast array of militias. The Yazidi genocide “must never happen again”, Barham Salih, the Iraqi president, solemnly intoned at a recent official tribute in Baghdad for Yazidi victims whose remains were discovered in Sinjar.³

The Yazidis, among the most fragile of Middle Eastern minorities, are a litmus test to understand if coexistence and diversity will have any role in a future Iraq. This ethno-religious minority now risks disappearing. From a Yazidi population estimated at between 500,000 to 700,000 before 2014, of whom around half lived in the Shekhan and Sinjar districts of the Nineveh Governorate in northern Iraq,⁴ just over 300,000 Yazidi souls are thought

[washingtonpost.com/world/2014/08/10/f8349f2a-04da-4d60-98ef-85fe66c82002_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2014/08/10/f8349f2a-04da-4d60-98ef-85fe66c82002_story.html).

³ Iraqi Presidency, *Iraqi President at Burial Ceremony for Yazidi Victims at Kocho: All Iraqis Must Work Together to Create a Country Where such Inhumane, Heinous Acts can Never Occur Again*, 6 February 2021, <https://presidency.iq/EN/Details.aspx?id=3204>.

⁴ Yazidi population figures vary. See for instance, Peter Henne and Conrad Hackett, “Iraqi Yazidis: Hazy Population Numbers and a History of Persecution”, in *Fact Tank*, 12 August 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/?p=262316>; Otmar Oehring, *Christians And Yazidis in Iraq: Current Situation and Prospects*, Sankt Augustin/Berlin, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2017, <https://d-nb.info/1141052792/34>; Nisan Ahmado, “Tracking Missing Yazidis Increasingly Harder Six Years After IS Genocide”, in *VOA News*, 8 August 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/tracking-missing-yazidis-increasingly-harder-six-years-after-genocide>.

to remain today.⁵ About one third live in makeshift refugee camps, with the hope of one day joining the ones who have emigrated to Europe, Canada and the US. Others have either returned home or have settled down in Iraqi cities, mainly Duhok in Iraqi Kurdistan and Baghdad. Nearly 2,800 women are still missing.⁶

Recognition of their genocide from the Iraqi government in November 2014 was an important step forward⁷ – but it is clear that weak Iraqi state institutions are failing the Yazidis and other minorities. Almost none of the Islamic State perpetrators of the Yazidi genocide have been brought to justice. Security and reconstruction of Yazidi villages should have been speeded up, together with the rehabilitation of services and job creation. Instead, 60 to 80 per cent of Sinjar city remains badly damaged, as the Nineveh governor Najim al-Jabouri denounced,⁸ and 60 per cent of its inhabitants unemployed. In the unpretentious rooms of the Iraqi parliament in Baghdad, the law on Yazidi women survivors, that would provide reparation and integration, has only now been passed, after close to two years of stalemate due to the

⁵ IOM Iraq Mission, *Six Years After Yazidi Genocide, Investment in Services is Crucial for Returning Yazidi Families*, 16 July 2020, <https://iraq.iom.int/node/1507>.

⁶ Sura Ali, “Baghdad Holds First Ceremony for 104 Yazidi Victims of ISIS”, in *Rudaw*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/040220214>.

⁷ Yazda website: *Genocide Recognition*, <https://www.yazda.org/genocide-recognition>.

⁸ Najim al-Jabouri, “Mosul Not Getting the Funds Needed to Rebuild: Nineveh Governor”, in *Rudaw*, 9 October 2020, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/09102020>.

fractiousness of Iraqi political parties.⁹

As if that were not enough, the security situation remains complex – and menacing. Mount Sinjar, where much of the Yazidi genocide took place, is strategically located along the border with Syria, on lands that are disputed between the central Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government. It has been a thoroughfare for the smuggling of weapons, goods and fighters to and from war-torn Syria for years – and the spill-over effects of the long Syrian civil war have deeply affected the security of the entire area.

Turkey's on-going war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – which are also embedded in Mount Sinjar – are making the situation worst. The Sinjar district has been witnessing airstrikes by the US-led anti-IS international coalition forces, intra-Kurdish clashes, military confrontations between Iran-backed Iraqi militias and Kurdish armed forces, the return of the Iraqi army and federal police and, last but not least, intensified Turkish bombardment of PKK positions.

A glimmer of hope occurred last October, with a landmark security agreement between the central government in Baghdad and the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq

⁹ Kristin Smith and Sonali Dhawan, "'Yazidi Female Survivors Law' in Iraq Is Groundbreaking But Not Enough", in *OpenGlobalRights*, 13 October 2020, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/yazidi-female-survivors-law-in-iraq-is-groundbreaking-but-not-enough> ; Sura Ali, "Iraqi Parliament Passes Yazidi Survival Bill after Years of Delays", in *Rudaw*, 2 March 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/010320214>.

on expelling the PKK from Iraq.¹⁰ This Arab-Kurdish effort aims primarily at appeasing Turkey and ultimately allowing a safe return of thousands of Yazidi refugees to the district. Unsurprisingly, the agreement was immediately rejected by the PKK – as well as a number of pro-PKK Yazidi militias and some of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs).

The implementation of the agreement remains opaque, to say the least. In early December, Kurdish Prime Minister Masrour Barzani declared that no forces had withdrawn from the city and from the district. Turkish military incursions resumed along the Turkish-Iraqi border early this month. In response, Baghdad has now deployed three PMFs brigades to Sinjar, in an effort to keep the Turkish army away from the area and "combat terrorism", as reported by the PMFs media directorate after the meeting of their leader Abd al-Aziz al-Muhammadawi (himself on the US terrorist list) with Iraqi president Barham Salih on 17 February.¹¹

The Turkish president has not hidden his intentions to use Iraqi soil in its fight against the PKK – with or without Iraqi approval – "until we crush the head of terrorism", as Erdoğan emphatically declared in mid-February.¹² Turkey,

¹⁰ "Content of the Baghdad-Erbil Agreement on Shingal", in *KirkukNow*, 10 October 2020, <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/63613>.

¹¹ Sura Ali, "President Salih Discusses Paramilitary Movement in Shingal, Kirkuk with PMF Leader", in *Rudaw*, 17 February 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/17022021>.

¹² "Turkey's Anti-Terror Operations Will Continue: Erdoğan", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 February 2021, <https://www.hurriyetaidailynews>.

after all, maintains some 20 “temporary” military bases in the country, despite regular Iraqi protests at the UN Security Council.

Under these difficult political, administrative and security circumstances, it is hard to predict how many more Yazidi refugees might return to Sinjar in the near future. Beyond IS violence and Iraqi negligence, the Yazidi community is geographically dispersed, militarily fragmented and now internally divided. The selection last year of Mir Hazim Tahsin Beg as the successor of his late father and the religious-political leader of the Yazidi community, did not find unanimous consensus among Yazidi notables. In Sinjar, some of them claimed to have not been sufficiently consulted and proclaimed another Yazidi as their leader.¹³ This schism risks further weakening traditional leadership and the Yazidi community's social and spiritual ties.

Against this backdrop, a sustained international effort should be mounted to help Iraq protect its precious tradition of ethnic and religious diversity – and save the Yazidis. The 389 million US dollars which the United States has spent on minority assistance in the Nineveh Plains since 2017 is a step in the right direction. Even more so is US direct support, in small grants to local faith-based and community

[com/turkeys-anti-terror-operations-will-continue-erdogan-162488](https://www.iaisonline.com/turkeys-anti-terror-operations-will-continue-erdogan-162488).

¹³ Saad Salloum, “New Yazidi Prince Appointed in Iraq Amid Sharp Divisions”, in *Al-Monitor*, 3 August 2019, <http://almon.co/38lc>; “Coronation of Yazidi Chief Prince Naif bin Dawud by Sinjar Tribal Leaders”, in *YouTube*, 25 August 2019, <https://youtu.be/QEZuyaqFuNk>.

organisations, that promote a bottom-up approach and strengthen civil society. Much more is needed, however, and political pressure on the Iraqi government to follow through on its commitment to protect minority rights must be sustained.

Pope Francis' visit to Iraq can do this from the height of his moral authority. The Pope has tirelessly called on world leaders to protect minorities in Iraq and in the Middle East. In particular, he has asked the Iraqi government to create the security, economic and social conditions for Christians to remain and prosper in their ancestral lands. On the ground, he has supported a network of Christian NGOs to help Christian and non-Christian communities in the fields of education, health and reconstruction: the Papal visit does have a strong inter-faith component as well.¹⁴

The Yazidis' hope is that the international visibility brought about by the Pope's visit will help open the eyes of the world to the plight of Iraq's religious minorities – and that those eyes will not shut once again as the Pope departs Iraq on 8 March.

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¹⁴ Robin Gomes, “Chaldean Patriarch: It Is Wrong to Expect Pope to Solve Iraq's Problems”, in *Vatican News*, 19 February 2021, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-02/iraq-pope-francis-visit-chaldean-patriarch-positive-media.html>; “Pope Francis' Programme for Apostolic Visit to Iraq Announced”, in *Vatican News*, 8 February 2021, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-02/pope-francis-programme-for-apostolic-visit-to-iraq-announced.html>.

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