Survival, Coexistence, and Autonomy:

Yezidi Political Identity after Genocide

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Introduction

In contemporary Yezidi discourse, violence has a cyclical character, in contrast to interpretations of history that posit the progressively declining role of violence in human affairs.[1] A sense of historical victimhood is central to the formation of Yezidis communal identity whose very survival was at stake in different time periods. Accordingly, the IS attacks in 2014 were perceived as the latest in a series of atrocities Yezidis experienced since the medieval times. The attacks are called "the 74rd firman" implying continuity with previous episodes of mass scale violence targeting the community. While the IS attacks involving mass executions and enslavement shocked the conscience of the international community, for Yezidis, the tragedy of August 2014 was not unprecedented in terms of its harm. In the words of a Yezidi leader, "[In 1832], [t]hey took away a thousand of our girls. A thousand was plenty. Our population was much smaller by that …You now see lots of [Sunni] Kurds around. Their fourth or fifth generation ancestors were Yezidis."[2] In his eyes, Yezidis have historically been targeted because of their religious beliefs and subject to sexual violence and forced conversions. The main difference between the past massacres and the current one was the widespread publicity characterizing the IS violence that triggered an international humanitarian intervention, which was in fact unprecedented.

This prevailing discourse of victimhood implies that Yezidis were subject to violent campaigns primarily due to their religious identity. In fact, Orthodox Islamic perspectives define Yazidis as polytheists or unbelievers and do not treat them as "People of the Book," unlike Christians and Jews who are entitled to certain rights and a limited degree of autonomy in their internal affairs. This liminal status, similar to the experience of other religious groups that emerged after the rise of Islam such as Alevis, Kakais, and Bahais, put Yezidis in a precarious position and more vulnerable to violence justified on religious

grounds over centuries from the fatwas of the leading Ottoman jurist Ebu's-suud in the 16th century to the IS in the 21st century. From this perspective, the very existence of Yezidis as a non-Islamic group has been a source of major security concern and religious challenge to the political order in Muslim societies. While the rise of political secularism with the formation of the Iraqi national state provided a semblance of stability for Yezidis, the post-2003 period was characterized by the collapse of the state authority and violent sectarianism signified the return of religious violence targeting Yezidis *qua* Yezidis.

This chapter suggests that the IS attacks of 2014, which exhibits certain similarities with the past violence, has had unique implications for Yezidis. The contemporary forms of Yezidi identity exhibit two distinctive characteristics in the post-genocidal era. First, Yezidis have gained unprecedented recognition and interest in the international arena. While Yezidis had a long history of contacts with Western diplomats, scholars, and travelers going back to the first half of the 19th century, the community as the victims of religious intolerance and persecution brought the community under global limelight in the post-2014 period. In particular, captive Yezidi women subject to extreme forms of sexual violence have come to embody the experience of the community. This gendered experience facilitated a context for Yezidi women to express their perspectives and become vocal voices, such as Nadia Murad, to communicate the experiences of the Yazidis to the international community and make political demands. Given the long history of entrenched patriarchal practices in the community, the increased visibility of Yazidi women and their increased engagement with issues that affect their community represents a paradoxical outcome of the IS violence.

Next, the massive displacement suffered by the community contributed to the fragmented nature of Yezidi politics. This process of fragmentation has taken place at two parallel levels. On the one hand, Yezidis are subject to the authority of an increasing number of political actors with opposing agendas. The failure and inability of the Kurdish military forces to protect the Sinjar area against the IS onslaught in early August 2014 generated sentiments of disillusionment and resentment among large sections of the Yezidi community. This development drew a wedge between the Yezidis and Sunni Kurds despite their common linguistic characteristics. Even if the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) pursues a policy of co-optation and symbolic empowerment towards the Yezidis, the

debacle of August 2014 has had a strong negative impact over the popular appeal of a hyphenated identity of "Yezidi-Kurds." Meanwhile, the rise of the PKK as a significant military force in the Sinjar area and the capture of most parts of the Sinjar by the Iraqi government and Shiite militias led to the proliferation of political forces. On the other hand, there has been a notable increase in the number of Yezidis who claim to speak on behalf of the community and pursue different goals both in Iraq and Western countries. Ironically, the relative demographic and political weakness of the Yezidi community has contributed to its political fragmentation, as different Yezidis seek the support of a variety of local and international entities.

The chapter first offers a historical overview of the Yezidis' interactions with local and imperial rulers since the rise of the community with its distinctive religious belief system by the 13th century. Yezidis always remained outsiders to the Ottoman *millet* system offering limited tolerance and autonomy to non-Islamic groups such as Christians and Jews. At the same time, large-scale military campaigns targeting Yezidis were not exclusively or primarily religiously motivated. The Ottoman pashas led many expeditions against Mt. Sinjar inhabited by several Yezidi tribes primarily in order to protect the caravan routes linking northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia with Mesopotamia. With the advent of the 19th century, Yezidis became targets of Ottoman centralization efforts aiming at tax collection and conscription that continued after the establishment of the Iraqi state in the 1920s. Next is a narrative of the violence experienced by the Yezidis in the post-2003 era. The general atmosphere of sectarian insecurity and rise of radical Islamist groups have made Yezidis more dependent on the KRG that perceived the Yezidi community as an important leverage in its claims over disputed territories in the province of Nineveh. However, the IS blitzkrieg in 2014 undermined this dependency and exposed the vulnerability of Yezidis lacking a defense force of their own. The remaining sections of the chapter focuses on the rise of an ethnoreligious national identity in intersection with gender identity among Yezidis amid political fragmentation in the post-genocidal period. The chapter concludes with a brief reflection on the future evolution of Yezidi politics.

A Liminal Existence: Yezidis under the Ottomans

Yezidism, primarily a set of beliefs and practices transmitted orally across generations, has an inherent tendency to defy orthodoxy associated with religions with a history of extensive records. As eloquently articulated by Philip Kreyenbroek, no dogmatic and official form of the faith exists. The pursuit of defining Yezidism according an authoritative and canonical textual source overlooks oral traditions central to its lived experience.[3] Unlike Mandeans who claimed to have sacred books of their own, probably to escape persecution in the hands of powerful Muslim rulers, Yezidi went to lenghts to hide their purported books from outsiders.[4] Nonetheless, the attempt to identify the textual origins of Yezidism has been a major occupation of both Western and Muslim travelers, scholars, and intellectuals who often perceived the community as an exotic group with strange and arcane customs for an extended period time.[5] In particular, the widespread usage of the epithet of "devil-worshippers," which conflates the sacred status of Peacock Angel for Yezidis as an affront to the Muslim God, suggests that the community remained *illegible* for outside observers for centuries.[6]

The Yezidis remained an illegible community in the eyes of Ottoman rulers who established their dominance over territories inhabited by Yazidis in the early 16th century. At the same time far from being defenseless and helpless subjects, Yezidis were autonomous political actors with significant capacity for coalition-building, negotiation, and resistance. There are numerous records of Yezidi tribal chiefs being appointed as local Ottoman rulers and engaging in alliances with or against Sunni tribal chiefs.[7] The community presented two overlapping but distinct challenges to the Ottoman order. First, Ottoman rulers perceived Mt. Sinjar, an arid and narrow mountain range with commanding views of the trade routes between Baghdad and Mosul, in the southeast, and Aleppo, Diyarbakir, Mardin in the northwest, as a bastion of insecurity and banditry.[8] They organized a series of punitive expeditions against Yezidi tribes who engaged in raids targeting caravans. For instance, Evliya Çelebi, the renowned Ottoman traveler, was an observer in such an expedition in 1655. He described Yezidis of Sinjar as "wild savages, rebellious, ghoul faced, hairy infidels" who worshiped a black dog.[9] He also narrates a

previous expedition by the ruler of Diyarbakir in 1640 resulted in massacres and enslavement of thousands of Yezidis.[10]

Evliya Çelebi's dehumanization of Yezidis was not untypical and pointed out to a second dynamic characterizing the Ottoman-Yezidi relations. Yezidis with their "illegitimate" belief system remained outside of the Ottoman moral order. Even if the campaigns against Mt. Sinjar were often motivated by security concerns (i.e., securing the caravan routes and recovering stolen goods), large scale and indiscriminate violence against Yezidis were justified on religious grounds.[11] In this regard, it is possible to draw parallels between the Ottoman state' perception of Sinjar and the Ottoman and later Turkish state's perceptions of Dersim in eastern Anatolia.[12] Using the concept developed by James Scott, these two mountain ranges with their natural defenses against invading forces can be described as stateless zones with a long history of indigenous people resisting or fleeing state authorities, Yezidis in Sinjar and Zazaki speaking Alevis in Dersim.[13] In both cases, the state authorities perceived as these regions as a *stateless zone* inhabited by a group whose "deviant" religious beliefs foster disloyalty and make them potentially rebellious.[14]

The history of Ottoman-Yezidi interactions during the last century of the Empire demonstrates several tendencies shaping the imperial policies and priorities. The advent Ottoman modernization of the 19th century involved the imposition of conscription, improvements in tax collection, and projection of central state authority into remote corners of the empire. Meanwhile, the Russo-Turkish wars, especially the conflict in 1877, resulted in thousands of Yezidi being subjects of the Russian Empire.[15] The 1830s and 1840s saw a series of campaigns against Sinjar that remained a geopolitically important area controlling the line of communication between Diyarbakir and Mosul.[16] A permanent Turkish garrison in the more accessible southern Sinjar was established only after 1849.[17] At the same time, the Ottomans were less successful in conscripting Yezidis.[18] After the powerful British Ambassador in the Ottoman capital intervened on their behalf, Yezidis of Sheikhan and Sinjar were able to obtain an exemption in 1850.[19] In a petition submitted to the Ottoman authorities and representatives of European powers, Yezidi leaders demanded exemption from obligatory military service on religious grounds. This was the first time Yezidis presented a stylized version of their belief systems to the outside world in a written

document. Even if the Ottoman state continued to treat Yezidis as a liminal minority not qualified to be included in the *millet* system, it also showed flexibility and accepted that Yezidis made a payment in lieu of serving in the Ottoman army.

Religious considerations became more central to how the Ottoman state dealt with the Yezidis during the reign of Abdülhamid II. The project of making loyal subjects out of Yezidis involved systematic attempts at their conversion at a time when increasing presence of foreign representations and missionaries in the eastern provinces aggravated the threat perception of the Ottoman state. The conscription of Yezidis would facilitate their Islamization, and make them immune to the appeal of foreign influences, and ensure their loyalty to the Ottoman order. An Ottoman Pasha entrusted with the task of dealing with the "Yezidi question" who arrived in Mosul in 1892 engaged in a campaign of terror and destruction that ultimately backfired. Hundreds of Yezidis were killed, the Lalish, the spiritual center of Yezidis, was converted to a madrasa, sacred religious objects were confiscated, mosques were built in Yezidi villages, leading figures of the community were forced to convert.[20] When the word of these coercive practices reached the Ottoman capital, the pasha was dismissed. Apparently, the Ottoman state did not approve pasha's brutal methods that sow disorder and insecurity in the region and recognized the limits of violence in achieving mass conversion.[21] The remaining decades of the Ottoman era did not see any large anti-Yezidi violence except for brief expeditions against Sinjar during World War I. Overall, this historical overview offers a nuanced picture of Yezidi victimhood under the Ottomans. While religious violence against Yezidis, a heterodox group excluded from the legitimate Ottoman intercommunal system, became salient in certain time periods, the community developed a strong sense of political autonomy and often achieved significant concessions via resistance or negotiations.

In the Crossfire: The Formation of Yezidi Political Identity in Post-2003 Iraq

During the Mosul dispute between the nascent Turkish Republic and the British controlled Iraq, most Yezidi leaders preferred Iraq under a European mandate over a Turkish or Arab government.[22] Nonetheless, Yezidis remained on the margins of the newly established Iraqi state. Conscription continued to be a major concern for the community and triggered small scale acts of rebellion in Sinjar, which gained a new geopolitical importance as a border

zone between Syria and Iraq.[23] Ironically, the marginal political influence of Yezidis could be a major reason for the absence of large-scale violence targeting the community in Iraq during the 20th century.[24] Nonetheless, the rising appeal of Kurdish nationalism among Yezidis starting with the early 1960s led to repressive policies by the Baghdad governments.[25] The ruling Ba'th regime initiated a systematic campaign of resettlement and Arabization targeting the Sinjar region.[26] Yezidis of the mountain villages were forced to relocate to 11 collective settlements surrounded by Arab villages receiving preferential treatment.[27] In the 1980s, a significant number of Yezidis served in the Iraqi army and lost their lives in the war with Iran. In the early 1990s, the establishment of an internationally enforced no-fly zone and the formation of de facto Kurdish autonomy saw the partition of Yezidi lands between Baghdad and Erbil. While the Sinjar area and southern Sheikhan remained under the Iraqi rule, Yezidi communities in Dohuk, other parts of Sheikhan district, and the Lalish temple fall under the Kurdish control.

In the post-2003 order, Yezidis became a crucial demographic bloc to KRG's claims over disputed territories and its power politics in the Nineveh province, one of the most contested areas in the entire country. In the 2005 referendum on the new Iraqi constitution, around 55 percent of the voters said no in the Nineveh province that also includes Sinjar. This was still short of the two-thirds of the vote that would result in the defeat of the new constitution.[28] Since the Kurds were the main beneficiaries of the new constitutional order, obtaining the Yezidi support in Nineveh was essential to their political goals. Article 2 of the constitution drafted in 2006 and passed in the KRG parliament in 2009 included Sinjar as part of Iraqi Kurdistan. Yezidis, who were subject to Arabization policies during the Saddam era, also benefited from the Kurdish patronage. For the first time, Sinjar district had a Yezidi governor. Some Yezidis joined the Iraqi army or Peshmerga and worked as translators for the US army. Other Yezidis found employment opportunities in Dohuk and Erbil and benefited from the Kurdish economic boom that lasted until 2014.[29] These developments generated some resentment among the Sunni Arabs and Turkomans in the area who lost their privileged positions and increasingly perceived the Yezidis as being part of the Kurdish power structure.[30] At the same time, a significant number of Yezidis were uncomfortable with the rising ethnic tensions and Kurdish exclusion and repression of Yezidis political activism espousing an independent

communal identity. They were fearful that their community was becoming pawns in the Kurdish-Arab territorial struggle and characterized the KRG policies as "Kurdification" of Sinjar.[31]

Like other religious minorities in Iraq, the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003 generated an atmosphere that was highly dangerous for Yezidis. As early as 2004, targeted killings of Yezidis because of their religious identity started to proliferate.[32] It became increasingly dangerous for Yezidis to get services, work or study at Mosul, which emerged as a hotbed of Sunni militant groups.[33] The self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) imposed a siege on the delivery of food, fuel, and construction materials to Sinjar as it considered Yezidis unbelievers.[34] After a Yezidi girl was stoned to death her relatives and community for allegedly having an affair with a Sunni man in April 2007, the ISI urged its followers to kill Yezidis wherever they find them. Two weeks later, armed men stopped a bus, checked passengers' identification documents, and ordered non-Yezidis off the bus. Then they drove the hijacked bus to Mosul and executed 23 Yezidis there.[35] The most lethal terrorist attack in post-2003 Iraq, suicide bombings in Al-Qahtaniya (Girzerik) and Al-Jazeera (Siba Sheikh Xidir) collective towns inhabited by Yezidis, killed several hundreds of people on August 14, 2007.[36]

These developments made Yezidis of Sinjar more dependent on the Kurdish authorities for their security who increased their control of the area especially after the 2007 bombings. Between 2005 and 2009, Kurdish parties increased their vote share at the expense of autonomous Yezidi parties in Sinjar. While the Kurdish Alliance received 44,224 votes (approximately 60 percent of the valid votes), the Yezidi Movement for Reform and Progress received 17,055 votes (app. 22 percent) in the Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict in the December 2005 parliamentary elections.[37] In comparison, the Kurdish alliance received 101,606 votes (app. 78 percent) while two autonomous Yezidi parties received only 7,787 votes (app. 6 percent) in the January 2009 provincial elections.[38] By that time, the Yezidi support for the Kurdish political goals in Nineveh became even more important as the Sunni Arabs now started to actively participate in the electoral politics.

At the same time, the KRG authorities do not recognize Yezidis as a distinct ethnoreligious group but as ethnic Kurds with distinct religious beliefs. In the eyes of KRG leaders, Yezidism is the "original Kurdish religion" that set Kurds historically apart from

Arabs, Persians, and Turks, their Muslim neighbors Muslim populations. In this regard, Yezidism was incorporated into the Kurdish nationalist discourse.[39] Article 6 of the draft KRG constitution explicitly mentions only Turkomans, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Armenians, and Arabs as distinct national groups. Article 7 states that the Islamic law is one of the sources of legislation while indicating the rights and freedoms of Christians and Yezidis and other religions are to be protected.[40] The KRG parliament has 111 seats with 11 of these seats reserved for Chaldeans, Assyrians, Armenians, and Turkomans and none for Yezidis.[41]

In summary, the fall of the Saddam regime had a mixed blessing for the Yezidis. On the one hand, there was an improvement in the material well-being of the Yezidis in the post-2003 era. Some Yezidis, especially the ones serving in the Iraqi army or working for the U.S. army, improved their economic situation, built themselves houses and purchased cars.[42] Moreover, Yezidis affiliated with the KDP, the dominant party in the KRG, gained access to greater political patronage and resources. On the other hand, the rise of sectarian extremism made the situation of Yezidis, a historically marginalized community, even more precarious. They were disproportionately targeted by extremist groups and became increasingly dependent on the Kurdish Peshmerga for their very survival. Besides, the KRG's attempts to reconstruct Yezidi identity by emphasizing its common linkages with Kurdishness generated some backlash among Yezidis of Sinjar who were fearful that increasing ethnic conflict over disputed territories in Nineveh would result in their scapegoating.

An Ethnoreligious National Identity?

In the early hours of August 3, 2014, the so-called Islamic State (IS), which already captured Mosul and the surrounding areas in less than two months ago, staged a coordinated attack against the Sinjar region. As the Kurdish forces withdrew in panic, the IS quickly overrun any feeble defense shown in Yezidi collective towns. During this campaign, at least 1,500 Yazidis were executed while almost 1,500 died on Mt. Sinjar from dehydration or starvation.[43] Around 6,400 Yazidis, mostly women and children, were kidnapped. Many of them were subsequently sold as "slaves" by IS.[44] Women were raped repeatedly; children were forced to convert and brainwashed to serve as soldiers for the IS. Although other religious minority groups in northern Iraq were also targeted by IS, the

scale of anti-Yazidi violence was unparalleled. Testimonies by survivors suggest that many local Muslims, including former friends, "blood brothers," and godfathers of Yezidi children, took an active part in the killings and kidnappings. Accordingly, most killings and kidnappings took place in towns such as Siba Sheik Xidir, Girzerik, and Kocho that were close to Arab settlements.[45] Yezidis in the northern part of the mountain had more time to take refuge in Mt. Sinjar.[46] The IS control of the Sinjar city center ended in November 2015; the entire Sinjar district was liberated by spring 2017. Yet the scope of destruction, poisoned intercommunal relations, and prevailing political instability have prevented reconstruction efforts. Five years after the attacks, most Yezidis of Sinjar either stayed in IDP camps in Iraqi Kurdistan or sought refuge in Western countries.[47]

This catastrophic development had a monumental impact on Yezidi political identity and had three specific consequences. First, for the first time in their history, Yezidis emerged as a political community attracting significant international interest and concern. The Obama Administration's decision to authorize airstrikes against the IS was triggered by the human tragedy experienced by the Yezidis stranded on Mt. Sinjar.[48] International organizations including the United Nations described the anti-Yezidi attacks as genocide.[49] A Yezidi survivor woman, Nadia Murad, became the co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for her global activism against sexual violence in war. The German federal state of Baden Württemberg initiated a humanitarian admission program specifically forYezidi women survivors and their children (but not necessarily adult male members of their family).[50] While it would take some years to fully assess its effects, this global spread of the community led to the diversification and internationalization of Yezidi activism with the formation of various associations by Yezidis based in Western countries.[51] With support from various international actors, these associations have made two core demands influenced by political liberalism and transitional justice discourses: (a) the recognition of the IS attacks against Yezidis as genocide and (b) the formation of international tribune to try and convict individuals who participated in these attacks. The fact that the International Criminal Court (ICC) does not have automatic jurisdiction over Iraq and Syria, which are not part of the Rome treaty of 2002 that created the ICC, complicated these efforts.[52] The captured IS militants were tried in Iraqi courts where many of whom found guilty and sentenced to death. Thousands of IS fighters from many different countries were detained

by PYD forces in northern Syria after the liberation of the last piece of land held by the IS in March 2019. Yet not a single IS member was put on trial for crimes specifically committed against Yezidi people.[53]

Another important consequence of the IS attacks on Yezidi political identity is the strained links between Yezidis and the KRG. As indicated before, the KRG established political and military control over Yezidi inhabited territories and extensive patronage networks incorporating a large number of Yezidis between 2003 and 2014. However the panicked withdrawal of the Kurdish forces from Sinjar in August 2014 was a major disappointment. While some Yezidis argued that the Kurdish forces lacked the capacity to resist against the IS onslaught, many others portrayed the withdrawal as an act of betrayal demonstrating the dispensability of Yezidis for the Kurdish leadership.[54] In response, the KRG authorities undertook several initiatives including the establishment of an office responsible for rescuing Yezidis kidnapped by the IS and diplomatic efforts aiming to have the anti-Yezidi attacks recognized as genocide.[55] The term genocide evokes a strong emotional and political meanings for Iraqi Kurds given the legacy of Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign involving chemical weapons attacks, massacres, sexual violence, and mass deportation against Kurdish people in the late 1980s. The description of Anfal as genocide has been central to the legitimacy of Kurdish pursuit of statehood and independence from Iraq.[56] By labelling the IS violence against the Yezidis as another genocide victimizing ethnic Kurds, the Kurdish authorities sought international support for the formation of an independent Kurdistan where religious minorities would be safe from extremist violence. The KRG authorities organized polling stations in IDP camps and strongly urged Yezidis displaced from Sinjar to vote in the referendum.[57] In this regard, the recognition of Yezidi victimhood has been made central to Kurdish victimhood and pursuit of independence. At the same time, the failure of Kurdish forces to protect Yezidis fostered demands for the formation of an autonomous region for religious minorities in Nineveh under international supervision. For instance, Yazda, one of the most well-known Yezidi humanitarian and lobbying organizations, explicitly calls for such autonomy.[58] Similar demands were also put forward by various Christian groups.[59]

A final transformation following the IS attacks concerns the end of the KRG control over Sinjar. While the KRG forces gained back parts of Sinjar from the IS, they withdrew

completely from the area in the face of the Iraqi and Shiite militia advances in October 2017. As a result, for the first time, a Shiite political force asserted military supremacy over Yezidis lands and aimed to cultivate its own patronage networks among Yezidis by taking advantage of intra-Yezidi divisions.[60] Besides, the PKK, a Kurdish nationalist force with a history of rivalry with the KDP, made significant inroads among Yezidis in the post-2014 period.[61] During the attacks, the PKK militants played a highly visible role in opening up a humanitarian corridor between Mt. Sinjar and the Syrian border controlled by the PYD, a PKK affiliate. This corridor enabled desperate Yezidis who took refuge in Mt. Sinjar to reach safety. The PKK established a permanent presence in the area and successfully recruited a significant number of Yezidi men and women, who were disenchanted with the KDP, to its militia.[62] Like the KDP, the PKK also emphasizes Kurdishness of Yezidis, but offers a distinct ideological alternative. In particular, the PKK with its secular, equalitarian, and gender progressive platforms presented itself as a vehicle of empowerment for Yezidi women subject to extreme levels of sexual violence and patriarchal practices.[63] Moreover, the PYD forces rescued many kidnapped Yezidi women and children from the IS captivity in northeastern Syria. Building on a blueprint that was implemented successfully in northern Syria (and unsuccessfully in Kurdish areas of Turkey), the PKK declared "democratic autonomy" for Sinjar and sought international support. The rise of the PKK as a viable force vying for support among Yezidis contributes to further fragmentation of Yezidi political identity and complicates the formation of a unified stance among Yezidis who are more spread out than ever before.

Gender & Politics among the Yezidis

IS's attacks against the Yezidis revealed once again the centrality of gender in political violence. Indeed, sexual violence has been used as a deliberate and systematic tool to commit genocide and ethnic cleansing against religious and ethnic communities in many other contexts in recent decades as well, such as in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda and the DRC.[64] Groups such as IS use specific, typically patriarchal, gender norms in intersection with identity perceptions towards religious or ethnic groups to justify violence.[65] The precarious position of the Yazidi minority in Iraq, as explained earlier in the chapter, played an important role in IS's targeting of this community. The lawlessness and

insecurity created by sectarian violence in Iraq further exacerbated existing discriminatory attitudes towards the Yezidis, as well as other minority communities.[66]

IS explicitly justified its gendered violence against the Yezidis through its interpretation of certain Islamic rules and practices. It defined the Yezidis as a "pagan" minority and non-believers and treated them differently from members of other religions such as Christians. According to IS ideology, Christians and Jews are considered as the "People of the Book" who can be treated as immune from certain practices during war, such as abducting and raping female members of these communities.[67] IS believed that it was allowed to kill male members of the Yezidi community if they do not convert to Islam, and to abduct, rape and sell the Yezidi women and girls, and force them to do house labor.[68] After their capture, the Yezidi women and children were shared amongst IS fighters that participated in the occupation of Sinjar and after that one fifth of the captives, in IS terminology 'slaves', were transferred to the IS authorities to be divided as 'profit'.[69] Captured Yezidi women and girls lived under circumstances in which they had no control, and they were entirely stripped off their ability to control their life, body and dignity.

The Yezidi community's own gender norms, especially the embodiment of men's and families' 'honor' in women's bodies, made these attacks particularly unsettling for the community. Yezidis' gender norms were used as a tool by IS to discourage abducted Yezidi women not to escape. Yezidi survivors were reported to say that their captives told them that if they returned to their communities, they would be killed, referring to the practice of 'honor' killing, or would not be accepted back home.[70] The Yezidis, including Yezidi leaders, consider the sexual violence perpetrated by IS against Yezidi women and girls as an attack against the whole of the community. As Mîr Tehsîn Seîd Beg, the hereditary leader of the Yezidis stated the Yezidis could have maybe reconciled and went back to living with their Arab neighbors even after killings; but IS' treatment of thousands of Yezidi women and girls would make it very hard to reconcile.[71] The experiences of the Yezidis left lasting scars for the community and led to extreme levels of post-war trauma and PTSD .[72]

Sexual and other forms of violence experienced by the Yezidis cannot be treated as simply an outcome of IS's extreme methods or the result of conflict. There is a wider context of inequality and structures in place that made such violence thinkable and feasible. Interviews with members of the Yezidi community suggest that the community is

aware of these wider circumstances. They associate their experiences of violence and sexual violence to the long-term disadvantages of being a minority group in the disputed territories in Iraq and the historical prejudices against their community. Like many other minority communities in Iraq, a large section of the Yezidi community is located in disputed territories (between the Kurdish regional government and the Iraqi government), Being in this location puts them in a precarious position because these areas are typically neglected in terms of infrastructure, economic investment and provision of security and protection. Moreover, the history of religious prejudice against the community and the distrust between Yezidis and Iraqi and Kurdish have exacerbated the precariousness of their position. Gender norms also played a key role in these outcomes. The idea that women can be bought and sought for sexual purposes like a commodity and that they can be entirely stripped off their agency is a clear example of this. This extreme form of discrimination and violence practiced against Yezidi women can be seen as part of a continuum of wider discriminative practices and violences perpetrated against women in Iraq in general.[73]

Yet, alongside this, the community's experience of gendered violence by IS has had a transformative impact on the political and social life among the Yezidi community. These impacts can be analyzed in three interrelated aspects. First, IS's attacks and its violence against Yezidi women had significant effect on Yezidi attitudes about survivors of sexual violence. Female survivors who were held captive by IS and exposed to sexual and other forms of violence were initially hesitant about returning to their families and communities. They feared they would be rejected or killed for "tainting" the "honor" of the family.[74] With the February 2015 Declaration by the Yazidi religious authorities, survivor women as well as women and men who were forced to convert to Islam were re-accepted to the community. After this declaration, number of women and girls returning to their community increased. However, this does not mean stigma around being sexually assaulted have disappeared and life after return has been easy for returnees. Moreover, many of these women and girls continue to live with untreated trauma and in difficult conditions of displacement away from their homes. Some of these women have migrated to European countries and experiencing other difficulties such as being away from home and family, and

adjusting to life in a different culture.[75] Finally, the situation of children born to Yezidi women raped by their IS captors is a particularly challenging issue.[76]

Another significant impact of sexual violence against Yezidi women and girls is that taboos around talking about sexual violence in the Yezidi community has weakened after this experience. Generally, sexual violence is considered as a difficult issue to make public and acknowledge in most societies, as previous cases of sexual violence in armed conflicts across the world showed.[77] There has been a public silence about the experiences of Kurdish women sexually assaulted during the Anfal campaign.[78] In sharp contrast, sexual violence has become part of the public discourse and Yezidis integrated it into their communication with outsiders and Iraqi and Kurdish authorities to explain their situation, request support and express their needs and demands. Male community leaders, and brothers, fathers and husbands of survivors of sexual violence have openly discussed the issue. This is an interesting development because rather than shying away from it, Yezidis are openly talking about sexual violence in national and international platforms. Nadia Murad, a Yezidi sexual violence survivor herself, is seen as a spokesperson for communicating Yezidis' experiences and needs, and demand justice and protection for her community. These novel developments are unprecedented in the history of the Yezidi community.

Finally, there are indicators of changing perceptions about women's role and position in society among the Yezidi community. This is for two reasons. First, the experience of genocide and sexual violence made the community once again realize that their position as a community in Iraq is precarious. They do not have the necessary support political and economic structures and protection mechanisms. Therefore, some of the community members believe that empowering girls through enabling them to access to education and jobs can provide them some form of protection. A number of interviewees said that if their people in Sinjar were more educated and more aware of their life outside their communities, the genocide against their community would not have happened.[79] The second factor that contributed to changing perceptions about women's position is displacement. Displaced Sinjari Yezidis in Sheikhan and Duhok were able to meet with Yezidis living in these areas and interact with members of the Yezidi diaspora. Yezidis in Sinjar have generally more conservative norms about women's position in society

compared to Yezidis in the Duhok region that have been under Kurdish rule. After the attacks, several educated and experienced local Yezidi women in Duhok and Sheikhan began to work with women's rights organizations and humanitarian organizations to provide support for surviving and displaced Sinjari Yezidis and met and worked with them. One of the interviewed humanitarian NGO workers, who is a Yezidi herself, said "the Shingali[80] women were initially reluctant but then started to participate in training and even started working." She attributed this partly to the exposition of the more conservative Sinjari Yezidi communities to the more open life of the Yezidis in Duhok: "the Shingali community became more open towards women because they saw other Yazidi women, like those from Sharia. They saw that their women are open, they go to work, they go to school, so they thought to be a little bit more open with their women as well."[81]

Conclusion

The general feeling of insecurity characterizing post-Saddam Iraq, the rise of Sunni extremism, the conflict between the KRG and Iraqi central government involving Yezidi lands, and the further fragmentation of the community via migrations and forced displacements have made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for Yezidis to seek political accommodation as a non-assertive minority group. The genocidal attacks in 2014 has strongly reinforced this trend and contributed a proliferation of voices and platforms about distinctive Yezidi identity at local, national, and international levels. In this regard, Yezidis are latecomers to the global politics of recognition challenging allegedly difference-blind policies and demanding dignity for particular group identities.[82]

The Yezidi politics of recognition represents a major change in the community's self-identification and representation given the long history of Yezidis as a liminal community lacking official recognition during the Ottoman times and widespread prejudices about their belief systems persisting until now. It entails a strong emphasis on the distinctive nature of Yezidi identity and history, and a request for accountability of the crimes committed against Yezidis informed by discourses of transitional justice and feminism. This request for recognition also entails a strong gender dimension. The traumatic experience of systematic sexual violence pushed the community to question gender-related taboos and norms and women's position in private and public life, and to initiate some changes. In

their demands for protection and recognition, Yezidi advocacy groups and activists have explicitly incorporated Yezidi women, gender dimension and sexual violence. All these have led to significant symbolic gains that elevated Yezidis from an obscure minority into an internationally recognized religious minority suffering from crimes against humanity and deserving respect and protection.

Ironically, this rise of autonomous Yezidi politics is accompanied with an increasing communal fragmentation and dispersion and, an involvement of an even greater number of external actors in Yezidi affairs. The post-war conditions in Sinjar remain prohibitive for the revitalization of the Yezidi life there; geopolitical rivalries involving multiple local and regional forces make the formation of an autonomous zone for Yezidis highly implausible. Under these circumstances, one can expect that Yezidi diaspora would increasingly play a more important role in sustaining Yezidi collective identity, shaping its global image, and transforming relations within the community.

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[1] Pinker 2011.
[2] He is referring to the atrocities committed by a local Kurdish ruler, Mir Mohammad of Soran. Interviewed conducted in Sheikhan in September 2017.
[3] Kreyenbroek 1995.
[4] Khenchelaoui 1999, 23-5.
[5] Allison 2008.
[6] As late as 1935, *The New York Times* described Yezidis as "devil-worshippers" in an article about a punitive Iraqi expedition to Mt. Sinjar. "Rebellious Yezidis are subdued in Iraq," *The New York Times*, October 26, 1935.
[7] Mir Mohammad of Soran, whose violent campaign left a strong legacy in Yezidi oral traditions, attacked Yezidis because they were allied with his rival, the Behdinan Emirate. Layard 1850, 276-7; Longrigg 1925, 28; Guest 1993, 67-9.
[8] In Yezidi historiography, these campaigns make a plurality of firmans targeting the community. Cindî Reşo 2014.
[9] Çelebi 2013, 50. Kreyenbroek (1995, 36) observes that the violent events between the 14th century and the campaign of Mir Mohammad of Soran in 1832 left little trace in collective memory of the Yezidis.
[10] Ibid, 51-4. He writes that this campaign took the revenge of Karbala (54). In fact, there is a widespread association between Yezidis and Caliph Yazid whose soldiers massacred the grandson of Prophet Mohammad and his followers in Karbala in 680. This monumental event gradually led to the schism between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. For a detailed and nuanced discussion of the reverence shown to Yazid in Yezidi tradition, see Kreyenbroek, 37.
[11] Gölbaşı 2013, 3-4.
[12] Dersim was the scene of state-led massacres in 1937 and 1938. For the Ottoman/Turkish perception of Dersim and its people, see Goner 2017, chp 1.
[13] Scott (2009, 13) calls the great mountainous zone in Southeast Asia, Zomia, as "one of the largest remaining nonstate spaces in the world, if not *the* largest."
[14] This interpretation disagrees with Gülsoy (2002) who argues that religious differences never had primary influence on the Ottoman treatment of Yezidis. He argues that Ottomans targeted Yezidis only when they threatened the public order (134-5).
[15]For Yezidis in contemporary Transcaucasia, especially Armenia, see Nicolaus and Yuce 2019.
[16] A British officer visited Sinjar during this period (Forbes 1839).
[17] Fuccaro 1999, 4.
[18] Gölbaşı (2009) provides a highly informative narrative of the Ottoman-Yezidi relations regarding conscription.
[19] Guest, 104; Gölbaşı 2009, 95.
[20] Erdem (1996, 46, 59-60) writes that the post-1856 Tanzimat era brought an end to the Ottoman practice to enslavement of disobedient populations. At the same time, Parry (1895) observes that this fin de siècle

campaign entailed the kidnappings of Yezidi women and girls and their forced marriage to the Ottoman soldiers.

[21] Deringil 1999, 71-5. The Ottoman state eventually returned the possession of the Lalish temple and sacred objects to the Yezidi religious leadership.

[22] League of Nations 1925.

[23] Fuccaro 1997.

[24] There was little modern political participation among Yezidis. For instance, the Communist Party of Iraq that attracted marginalized ethnic and religious groups such as Christians, Kurds, and Shiite Arabs had very little Yezidi representation. Batatu 1978, 1190.

[25] Ali 2019.

[26] It also aimed to generate a historiography linking Yezidis to the Umayyad caliphate and arguing for their Arabic roots. See Majid Ali Hassan chapter in this volume.

[27] Savelsberg, Hajo, and Dulz 2010.

[28] Heavy majorities (more than two-thirds) in Anbar and Salahuddin voted no. Had the no vote in Nineveh also reached the two-thirds, the constitution would be rejected. BBC 2005.

[29] A Yezidi politician affiliated with a Kurdish party resembled Dinjar to Darfur region of Sudan given its underdevelopment. Interview with XXX, May 2018- XXX.

[30] Interview with Khidir Domle, May 2019. - XXX.

[31] UNAMI 2009 (We thank Peter Bartu for sharing this document with us); HRW 2009. A US diplomatic cable from 2008 published by Wikileaks notes that Mir Tahsin Said Beg, the foremost Yezidi leader, was worried with forceful transfer of Yezidi property to Kurdish ownership in Sheikhan with the goal of increasing the number of Kurds in the disputed territories of Nineveh. Available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BAGHDAD3776_a.html.

[32] UNHCR 2005.

[33] UNAMI 2009

[34] UNAMI 2009. According to UNHABITAT (2015), the Sinjar region had a population of 339,000 before the August 2014 attacks. Yezidis made around 74 percent of this population.

[35] HRW 2009.

[36] Some Yezidis label these attacks as "the 73rd firman."

[37] This Yezidi party won the parliamentary seat allocated for Yezidis in the 2005 Iraqi elections.

[38] UNAMI 2009; USIP 2011. There was a significant increase in the number of voters in Sinjar between 2005 and 2009 leading to the allegations of voting fraud.

[39] Spät (2018, 426) observes this idea of fusion between Kurdish and Yezidi identities found a less receptive audience among the Yezidis of Sinjar than the Yezidis living east of the Tigris, who have a longer and more intense history of contact with the Kurds.

[40] This draft constitution also talks about religious freedom of Yezidis in Articles 65 and 124. For an analysis of and text of the draft, see Kelly 2010.

[41]There was a single Yezidi politician affiliated with the KDP, Sheikh Shamo, in the KRG parliament elected in 2013. Two Yezidis one from KDP and another from PUK, gained seats in the September 2018 parliamentary elections. The inability of Yezidis from Sinjar, many of whom lived in camps in the Duhok province, significantly undermines electoral powers of the Yezidis in the KRG elections. Ironically, these displaced Yezidis were allowed to vote in the Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017.

[42] Dinç 2017.

[43] Cetorelli et al., 2017.

[44] As of August 2019, 3,509 of these captives were liberated, mostly through ransom payments, according to the statistics announced by the KRG.

[45] Kocho, where the worst atrocities took place, remained under siege until August 15 when the IS militants raided the town, executed adult males in groups, and enslaved women and children. According to survivor testimonies, IS militants included Arabs from neighboring villages.

[46] The exception to this pattern is the town of Herdan, located in the northwestern part of Mt. Sinjar, which was attacked by the neighboring Sunni Turkomans.

[47] As of February 2017, there were around 36,000 families in IDP camps in the Dohuk province of the KRG. Around 77 percent of these families were Yezidis (BRHA 2017, 18).

[48] "Obama allows limited airstrikes on ISIS," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2014. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/world/middleeast/obama-weighs-military-strikes-to-aid-trapped-iraqis-officials-say.html.
[49] OHCHR 2016.
[50] McGee 2018.
[51] The most well-known of these associations are Yazda and Free Yezidi Foundation.
[52] The ICC has jurisdiction over crimes committed by IS militants who are citizens of the countries that are members of the court. It is also possible for the UN Security Council to refer a case to the ICC, as it happened with atrocities in Darfur in 2005. Because of this referral, the ICC Prosecutor issued an indictment of then Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and accused him committing the crime of genocide. Yet the Trump administration, which is openly hostile to the ICC, was not willing to refer the case of IS atrocities to the international court.
[53] HRW 2017.
[54] Interviews in Dohuk, May 2018.
[55] In a statement delivered on the fourth anniversary of the IS attacks, then-KRG Prime Minister Nechirwan Barzani described the events "as one of the most barbaric genocides of the 21st century." *Rudaw,* August 3, 2018. Available at https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/030820182.
[56] Baser and Toivanen 2017.
[57] While many Yezidis were agnostic about the Kurdish referendum in 2017, Mir Tahsin Said Beg, who died in January 2019, asked Yezidis to support Kurdish independence. "Ji Mîre Êzidiyên Cîhanê banga referandûmê" *Rudaw*, September 23, 2017. Available at https://www.rudaw.net/kurmanci/kurdistan/230920175.
[58] Yazda Press Release, May 15, 2016. Available at https://www.facebook.com/yazda.organization/posts/yazda-press-releasea-statement-about-recent-political-developments-in-shingal-si/484781928398425/.
[59] Demands for autonomy have a long history among the Assyrians going back to the formative years of Iraq. Joseph 1961, chp 8.
[60] ICG 2018. Shiite views of Yezidis are complicated by the widespread perception that Yezidis are followers of Caliph Yazid, the most hated figure in the Shiite historiography. At the same time, there is no history of Yezidi-Shiite intercommunal conflict in recent history given their limited geographical contact. In fact, Yezidis and Shiites of Sinjar were participating in similar rituals and venerating the same shrine in the post-2003 period. Dirasat 2016, 95. Moreover, Shiite authorities strongly condemned the IS cruelty against Yezidis and Ayatollah Ali Sistani met with a Yezidi delegation. Ibid, 404-5.
[61] For an overview of KDP-PKK tensions over Sinjar, see Yılmaz 2018.
[62] The PKK presence in Sinjar aggravated threat perception of the Turkish state that conducted airstrikes in the area in numerous times.
[63] For the motives of women joining the PKK and its gender politics, see Tezcür 2019.
[64] Jefferson 2014.
[65] Davies and True 2015, 505.
[66] Maisel 2008; Oehring 2017. Shi'iite Turkmen women and girls, albeit at a significantly lower scale, were also among minorities in Iraq that were exposed to sexual violence by IS. Bor 2019.
[67] In practice, this distinction was not always kept. IS members did also kidnapped, raped, and enslaved Christian women. "Christian women kidnapped by IS reunited with father after four years," *Kurdistan 24*, April 5, 2018. Available at https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/987a77c3-56c3-44b7-a8f9-e6a8d63d0e00.
[68] *Dabiq* 2014, Issue 4, pp. 14-15.
[69] *Dabiq* 2014, Issue 4, p. 15.
[70] Interviews with members of Yezidi community, May 2018, Duhok.
[71] Interview with Prince Hassan, May 2018, Prince's House in Sheikhan.
[72]Erdener 2017; Kizilhan 2018.
[73] Geneva International Centre for Justice 2015, pp. 18-22.
[74] Interview with two Yezidi sexual violence survivors, Sharya camp, Duhok, May 2018.
[75] McGee 2018.
[76] According to three different NGO sources, the number of mothers with children from ISIS was around 200 as of May 2018. Some women gave their children to the PKK and some of them returned and took shelter with their child under the PKK. Yazidi survivors with children sometimes find different strategies to navigate in

this situation. Some claim to their families that they met a husband (usually dead or missing) at some point and the child was 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. Interviews in Duhok and Sheikhan, May 2018. The topic remains highly controversial among Yezidis. On April 24, 2019, Yezidi Supreme Spiritual Council issued a declaration accepting these children to the community before reversing it three days later.

[77] Jefferson 2014; Turshen 2001, p. 66.

[78] Moradi 2016.

[79] Interviews with Yezidi community members, December 2017 and May 2018, Duhok.

[80] Shingal is the local name for Sinjar.

[81] Interview with a Yezidi female humanitarian NGO staff, May 2018, Duhok.

[82] From this perspective, the lack of recognition of misrecognition can be a form of oppression Taylor 1994.