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Genocidal Rape and Community Cohesion: The Case of Yazidis

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Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) (rape and enslavement of Yazidi women) since the Islamic State's (IS) 2014 genocidal campaign against the Yazidis of Sinjar has had an enduring impact on the community and the prospects for intra- and inter-communal reconciliation. Yazidis continue to endure an exceptionally vulnerable existence in Iraq. Sinjar was liberated from IS in 2015, but restrictions, infrastructural problems, and the presence of different armed groups make return very hard for civilians. So far only a few thousand Yazidis are reported to be back, out of almost 350,000 IDPs who live in a transitory state in camps in areas administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).¹ Around 3,000 of the more than 6,000 kidnapped women and children are still missing, if not dead. In almost all my interviews with ordinary Yazidis, I was told Yazidis no longer had a future in Iraq and would just like "to go somewhere else."

In my field research since May 2018, I had 48 interviews with displaced and non-displaced Yazidis in Duhok and in the diaspora, Yazidi activists, religious leaders, NGO staff, and political representatives, as well as Kurdish doctors, psychologists and social workers. My research examines family attitudes towards formerly abducted women and community attitudes towards their reintegration into wider segments of the Yazidi community. I also look into the effects of CRSV on relationships between different social groups and between political elites and ordinary Yazidis. I argue that Yazidis' relations with Sunni Arabs and Kurds are characterized by a lack of trust, shaped by the experience of the genocidal assault by IS. A conditional acceptance and integration of survivors of captivity can be seen within the Yazidi community but on problematic terms: Families force victims to remain silent about their experience and abandon their children born out of rape.

Seeing no future or security for themselves in Iraq, many Yazidis have immigrated (usually to Western countries), and many others try to, through both legal and illegal means. As a historically marginalized and persecuted religious minority, the future of Yazidis and their identity in Iraq appears uncertain. Yet, the majority will probably continue to live in the country. Conditions of reconciliation are therefore not only of vital importance for Yazidis, but also for the reconstruction of peace in Iraq and the situation of all religious minority groups.

Lack of trust and feelings of insecurity

Intercommunity relations have been profoundly shaped by the memory of the IS assault. The complicity of some local Sunni Arab and Kurdish tribes with the IS fighters during the attacks and killing and enslaving Yazidis heavily eroded intercommunal relations.² The withdrawal of Kurdish Peshmerga forces before the attack made Yazidis an easy target for IS and created a sense of distrust and betrayal among the community against the Kurdish government.

During my fieldwork, many Yazidis expressed their distrust for all Muslims, without differentiating as Shias or Sunnis, or as Arabs or Kurds. I was told several times during the interviews that it was not safe for Yazidis to live in Iraq because it is a Muslim majority country, and that long-term peace and security were not possible for Yazidis since Muslims would attack them again as soon as they had the opportunity, as they had been doing nearly every 100 years. It is important to emphasize here that Yazidis do not perceive the IS persecutions as an extraordinary event but as the latest of the *firman*s³ which reoccur in cycles throughout their history. This further explains why they don't feel safe in Iraq and anticipate future massacres.

Many survivor testimonies address the participation of local Sunni Arab and some Kurdish tribes in the killings, looting, and rape and enslavement of Yezidi women.⁴ This local complicity has heavily contaminated Yezidi-Sunni Arab relations,⁵ making it very difficult for Yezidis to live in their villages in Sinjar where they are surrounded by Arab villages. One Yezidi survivor who is now an activist living in the United States recently tweeted:

The stupid Iraq prime minister, Haider Alabadi, wants to make a National Reconciliation between Arabs (ISIS) and Yezidis (Genocide Survivors). Isn't that so stupid? We still have over 3000 women and children captive by those Arabs. We still have remains of 5000 Yezidi elder, young and children on ground in mass graves who were murdered by those Arabs. We still have more than 80% of Yezidis displaced and refugees, their homes were destroyed, and their properties were stolen by those Arabs.

The categorization of IS to all Arabs, which was also common in my Yezidi respondents' discourses, signals a long-term difficulty in terms of intercommunal reconciliation.

Yezidis' relations with Kurds are more nuanced. While resentment remains over the perceived abandonment by the Peshmerga, the governing Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) had been increasing its control over Sinjar after 2007, in part by claiming Yezidis as ethnic Kurds, and hence Sinjar as part of Kurdistan. Non-displaced Yezidis living in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-controlled areas, especially those working for the government, peshmerga or Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), assert less prejudice against Kurds. Yezidis speak Kurmanji, the northern dialect of Kurdish. While some Yezidis identify themselves as Kurds, others (especially those from Sinjar region) identify themselves as a distinct ethno-religious group. If anything, we can speak of an increase among Sinjari Yezidis in self-identification as a distinct ethnic group after 2014. While issues

related to ethnic identity are more openly discussed among Yezidis in the diaspora, political pressure makes Yezidis in KRG, especially camp residents, refrain from commenting on the topic.

Another dominant topic in interviews were claims for retributive justice. Respondents' answer to the "most urgent thing to do" generally focused on finding the women and children who are still lost, locating mass graves, holding perpetrators accountable in courts, and providing security in Sinjar. They demand a separate coexistence in which Sinjar has an autonomous status which shall be under international protection, if Yezidis are to continue living in Iraq.

"They stole our girls. How can we live together anymore?"

We have today an extensive body of scholarly literature on the reasons and different forms of CRSV, aiming to explain the variation in its targeting, intensity and frequency.⁶ As for its social consequences, a research field which is still in development, studies point to the social stigma experienced by survivors of CRSV, as well as the detrimental effects of sexual violence during conflict on intracommunal relations.⁷

The Yezidi society is highly hierarchical and many aspects of daily life, especially gender relations, are regulated by strict patriarchal norms.⁸ Women's bodies and labor are strictly controlled in both public and private spheres, leading to different forms of gender-based violence including 'honor' killings.⁹ Yezidis can only marry someone from their own caste.¹⁰ For a child to be Yezidi, both her parents need to be Yezidis. Hence the sexual assault on Yezidi women and girls not only put the patriarchal structure of Yezidi society under great stress but also exacerbated the effects of genocide in terms of preventing repopulation.¹¹ What was specific to the Yezidi case was the establishment of sexual slavery as an institution, based on religious justifications.¹² Cathy Otten reports how, during an interview, a young Yezidi man, showing a photo of his Arab neighbor taken

while dining at their house, tells her that Yezidis are peaceful people who don't like violence but if he finds this neighbor who kidnapped his sister, "he will drink his blood."¹³ Some of my respondents expressed their willingness to have lost many more Yezidi men if this could save Yezidi women and girls from being enslaved.

In the Yezidi belief, having sexual contact with a non-Yezidi, whether it is a rape or consensual relationship, brings expulsion from the faith. In non-conflict contexts, Yezidi women might have been victims of so-called "honor-killings" by men of their faith in case they were believed to have sexual relations outside of marriage, with a Yezidi man or an outsider.¹⁴ Female survivors of CRSV during previous *firmons* did not even have the ability to return in most cases (taken as slaves and incorporated into Muslim families and tribes). The difference with post-2014 attacks is that up to 3,000 women were able to escape or were rescued by the help of their families given the weakening power of the IS. Reintegration of thousands of abductees was a challenge the community faced for the first time. Hence, when Baba Sheikh, the Yezidi supreme spiritual leader, issued an order to community leaders in September 2014 and clearly stated that survivors of IS captivity still remain Yezidis and that they ought to be invited back to the community, it meant a significant change in the Yezidi faith. Survivors of abduction are first brought to Lalish, the holiest temple, for rebaptism. Fisher and Zagros¹⁵ assert the importance of the ceremony of rebaptism of abductees for their reintegration and for intracommunity resilience.

The overall attitude of community towards survivors of captivity appear to be welcoming both in Iraq and in diaspora after Baba Sheikh's edict in mid-September 2014 which declared survivors of IS captivity (men and women) to still remain as pure Yezidis.¹⁶ While Baba Sheikh notes that he was first to decide to take the decision,¹⁷ a Yezidi psychiatrist as well as a Yezidi scholar both stated to me that they were the one to convince Baba Sheikh to take the step. On the other hand, a Yezidi IDP activist told me that the community pressed Baba

Sheikh to release the edict by protesting in front of his house, and that he was in a way forced by the community to take the step. Those who were hesitant about the decision (especially young or married Yezidi men whose relatives or wives had been kidnapped) were convinced by community leaders on the grounds that welcoming Yezidi women back to the society was part of fighting back at the IS and resisting the impacts of genocide. Families have been going through immense efforts, at times paying large amounts of money or risking their own lives, to bring Yezidi women and children back. In all interviews, respondents explained how much value and respect the community holds for female survivors and that these women merit the utmost support before any other Yezidis. In this regard, we can speak of resilience of the community.

The Head of Commission on Investigating and Gathering Evidence, a KRG government office responsible for documenting atrocities against Yezidis, indicated that while in a few cases the survivors refused to testify before the commission, the majority of female survivors were not reluctant in speaking about their experience before the judge. We can presumably infer that CRSV increases survivors' political participation and their demand for justice. As a matter of fact, some female survivors have become international advocates for their community;¹⁸ many others became activists and they speak to NGOs and the media to let the world know what has happened to them and the kind of help the community needs.

Yet this does not mean there is no stigma for survivors of captivity. Psychologists and social workers working with survivors of captivity in Duhok, at camps or elsewhere, expressed that while families are in most cases welcoming of former abductees, they nonetheless force them not to talk about their experience to others and control their interactions with non-family members. In Yezidi society, especially in the traditional, close-knit community of Sinjari Yezidis, social control mechanisms are quite strict on individuals. It can be argued that it is actually not a stigma against female survivors themselves

on the part of the families, but the very fear of social stigma by the community that makes families forcing the women or young girls not to share – which, in the end, is harmful to survivors' wellbeing as they cannot seek any help for their trauma. This is especially the concern for survivors who live in camps or who are displaced, and who lack any access to psychological support. Some families, however, seem less concerned when speaking to foreign journalists - sometimes even forcing the survivor to speak¹⁹ - in the hopes of getting some help as a result of the interview. Of the six former abductees I've interviewed, two were rejected by their husbands. At this stage, further research is needed to have a better understanding of the scope of resilience, stigma, and rejection among Yezidi community about survivors of captivity.

The issue of the children born out of rape remains a taboo topic, and the community is not ready to accept "IS babies".²⁰ I was told by doctors and scholars in Duhok that these children are usually sent to an orphanage in Mosul and that families would force survivors of CRSV to leave the child behind as a condition of returning back. One expert expressed her concern for infanticide cases, especially in camps. There are reports about women who had to move alone to another city because her family would not accept her with the child or who preferred to keep the child and not return back.²¹

Lastly, the whole experience of violence and being displaced seems to create a sense of lack of representation among Yezidis from Sinjar who stand in distance to KRG. Some IDPs expressed their disappointment towards Yezidi political and religious leaders, accusing them of being passive and unsusceptible during the attacks. Some respondents claimed community leaders to be in a pragmatic relationship with the KRG, acting for their own interests and not of the community. It is early to see any effects

of this perception in the highly hierarchical social context of Yezidis, yet it is possible to speak about an intracommunal tension. On the other hand, a sense of unity against the challenges of the survival of Yezidi identity is also visible. One of my respondents expressed this feeling of unity in her words: "After August 2014, life for a Yezidi turned upside down, wherever part of the world he/she is living." There are examples of wealthy businessmen dedicating all their resources and networks to the rescue of Yezidi women.²² Non-displaced Yezidis in host communities of Duhok work voluntarily in camps; those in the diaspora have founded international NGOs, organize events, engage in advocacy, and try to raise awareness. All these propose an increase in social-cohesion.

Conclusion

Reconciliation for Yezidis after the genocidal attack of the Islamic State is not only consequential for the community, which is characterized by a very precarious existence, but for the wider question of peace in Iraq. Recent literature on community reconciliation in post-conflict settings indicates that decay and resilience can occur simultaneously after conflicts.²³ My initial findings suggest a similar pattern: Inter-communal relations seem to be heavily infected by distrust where reconciliation faces many challenges, though Yezidis lack the political power to demand control over Sinjar and a separate coexistence. They nonetheless emphasize retributive justice rather than restorative justice²⁴. In terms of intra-community relations, a conditional resilience can be the general tendency among the families of CRSV survivors in which they welcome the survivor back on the condition of remaining silent about her experience and leaving the children born out of rape. The attitude of community towards CRSV survivors seems to be resilient without any conditions yet it is still not welcoming of babies.

Endnotes

1 Nadia's Initiative. In the aftermath of Genocide. Report on the Status of Sinjar. (2018).

2 Tezcür, Gunes Murat. "Three Years Ago, the Islamic State Massacred Yazidis in Iraq. Why?" The Monkey Cage Blog of the Washington Post. August 15, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/15/three-years-ago-the-islamic-state-massacred-yazidis-in-iraq-why/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ba5caf2e67ef

- 3 In Yazidi collective memory, “firmans” (mass killing of Yazidis by Muslim local rulers since the 13th century) occupy a central place. They believe the IS attack to be the 73th firman against Yazidis.
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- 5 Van Zoonen, Dave, and Khogir Wirya. “The Yazidis: perceptions of reconciliation and conflict.” Middle East Research Institute, (2017).
- 6 Cohen, Dara Kay. *Rape during civil war*. Cornell University Press, (2016). Leiby, Michele L. “Wartime sexual violence in Guatemala and Peru.” *International Studies Quarterly* 53.2 (2009): 445-468. For a review of the recent research on CRSV: Wood, Elisabeth Jean. “Conflict-related sexual violence and the policy implications of recent research.” *International Review of the Red Cross* 96.894 (2014): 457-478.
- 7 Koos, Carlo. “Sexual violence in armed conflicts: research progress and remaining gaps.” *Third World Quarterly* 38.9 (2017): 1935-1951.
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- 9 Phelps, Sandra Marie. “The limits of admittance and diversity in Iraqi Kurdistan: Femininity and the body of Du’a Khalil.” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 11(3-4), (2010): 457-472.
- 10 In Yazidi society, there are three main castes – Sheiks, Pirs, and Murids – which are further divided in different classes. The caste system constraints and regulates social life in the community, from intermarriage to even daily interactions.
- 11 Ashrapp, Sareta. “Acts of Annihilation, The role of gender in the commission of the crime of genocide.” *Confluences Méditerranée*, (4), (2017): 15-29.
- 12 According to the article “The Revival of Slavery before the Hour” published in October 2014 in IS’ official issue “The Failed Crusade”, the group engages in the enslavement of women from communities determined to be of “pagan” or “polytheistic” origin.
- 13 Otten, Cathy. *With Ash on their Faces: Yazidi Women and the Islamic State*. New York: OR Books, (2017): 131.
- 14 Phelps, Sandra Marie. “The limits of admittance and diversity in Iraqi Kurdistan: Femininity and the body of Du’a Khalil.” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 11(3-4), (2010): 457-472. Graham-Harrison, Emma. “I was sold seven times”: the Yazidi women welcomed back into the faith. *The Guardian*. July 1, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/01/i-was-sold-seven-times-yazidi-women-welcomed-back-into-the-faith>.
- 15 Fisher, Tyler and Nahro Zagros. “Yazidi Baptism and Re-baptism: Resilience, Reintegration, and Religious Adaptation.” In *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*. Routledge. (2018).
- 16 At the time of writing this article, the September 2014 edict (which was published in English in February 2015) was the only edict in place concerning the survivors. On April 24, 2019, the Yazidi Supreme Spiritual Council issued another statement about welcoming all survivors, which was quickly appraised by some Yazidi activists and community leaders as a historical move to accept children born out of rape. The statement created much controversy among the community and three days later, on April 27, the Council issued another edict for “clarification” and denied children born out of rape to be the subject of the previous statement. The “reformers” interpreted it as a revoke on the first decision due to the reaction from the community whereas “conservatives” argued that the first statement never mentioned children out of rape and the second one only clarified that.
- 17 Fisher, Tyler and Nahro Zagros. “Yazidi Baptism and Re-baptism: Resilience, Reintegration, and Religious Adaptation.” In *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*. Routledge. (2018).
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- 19 Foster, Johanna E., and Sherizaan Minwalla. “Voices of Yazidi women: Perceptions of journalistic practices in the reporting on ISIS sexual violence.” In *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 67, (2018): 53-64. Pergamon.
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- 21 Coles, Isabel and Ali Nabhan. “Nisreen’s Choice: Women Rescued from Islamic State Are Told to Leave Children Behind.” *Wall Street Journal*. (2018). <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nisreens-choice-women-rescued-from-islamic-state-are-told-to-leave-children-behind-1535025600>
- 22 Mikhail, Dunya. *The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq*. New York, New Directions, (2018).
- 23 Koos, Carlo. “Decay or Resilience?: The Long-Term Social Consequences of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone.” *World Politics*, 70(2), (2018): 194-238.
- 24 While retributive justice refers to “objective” measures such as punitive justice (punishing the offender), restorative justice implies taking into consideration “the subjective and intersubjective needs of a deeply divided society for socio-emotional reconciliation” with the implicit assumption that justice is a personal experience. Parent, Geneviève. “Reconciliation and justice after genocide: A theoretical exploration.” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 5.3 (2010): 277-292.